February 2004
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
Published by Amberlin
Issue 21

Published by
The Amberlin Group, LLC.

Chief Editor - Jeremy Whitted
Managing Editor - Brendon Taylor
Contributing Editor - Jeff Wheeler
Contributing Editor - Melissa Thomas
Associate Editors:
Peter Dahl
JW Wrenn
Rochelle Buck
Mark Reeder
Steven Richards
Matthew Scott Winslow
Usman Tanveer Malik

Graphic Design - Jeremy Whitted
Art Director - Jeff Wheeler
Associate Art Director - Reuben Fox

Marketing - Jeff Wheeler
Legal - Brendon Taylor

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: feedback@deep-magic.net

Cover by Matthew Stawicki
"Warrior's Bond"

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

All Content copyright © 2004
The Amberlin Group, LLC

Table of Contents

Note From the Editors 3
Special Announcement 4
Writing Challenge 5
Fantasy Short: *Across the Delta* 12
Featured Artist: Matthew Stawicki 13
Fantasy Short: *The Opaque Watch* 15
Interview: Guy Gavriel Kay 16
Fantasy Short: *Lost In Shadow* 19
Deep Magic Looks at Books 20
The Geek's Guide to Grammar 26
Fantasy Short: *Exile Into Hope* 27

Subscribe to Deep Magic!

A subscription to Deep Magic is absolutely free. Each month, we will notify you when a new issue is released. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers. Go to the website and subscribe today.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please send an email to feedback@deep-magic.net, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

February 2004

Many of you have been enjoying Deep Magic now since its very first issue. Many of you have honored us by thumbing a ride on our fantastic literary voyage along the way. In truth, Deep Magic is still a very young magazine. And, as it is in youth, often-times the hardest lessons are learned only through painful experience. We only learn what fire is by feeling its heat.

Because we value you, our readers, and the honest dialogue exploring the various facets of writing speculative fiction, we are writing this open letter to inform you of a recent unsettling and disappointing turn of events. Our new novel, *Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay*, which debuted in January, was much enjoyed by our editors when it was submitted, for its mirth and parody. We chose to publish it, in order to share that with readers. Unfortunately, the person who submitted the piece was not the person who wrote it. We were notified within days of its debut, and as soon as we had ascertained the truth of the matter, we removed the introductory chapters and sent our heartfelt apologies to the true author, whose fans rallied around her in a true testament to the impact of one writer's words.

To her immense credit, Ms. Keri Stevenson, the rightful author, placed no blame where blame was not due, and has even offered to let us serialize the novel under her name. We will be proud to continue the serialization of *Royalty of Wind, Fire, and Clay* at a future date to be announced, with Ms. Stevenson's name on it, and all deserving accolades accorded her.

Plagiarism, or in this case outright theft of a copyrighted material, is a despicable act that, although seemingly easy to get away with, has a way of turning on their perpetrators. Such is the case here, and it is hoped that a lesson has been learned. For our part, we apologize to Ms. Stevenson for any difficulties this has presented her, and we hope she will continue to tell the stories that are in her heart—fearlessly, and with the knowledge that her contribution to fantasy fiction is lauded.

In this issue then, friends, we continue to bring you the best of fantasy and science fiction. Without our usual novel offering, we find ourselves well-supported on the shoulders of our short story authors. From the author's home in Greece, to the last bastion of humanity, Nektarios Chrissos brings us an *Exile Into Hope*. A journey of another, darker sort is taking place *Across the Delta*, by Jonathan Rulund, while Sean T. M. Stiennon's poor woodcutter is *Lost In Shadow*, and in a treacherous wood. Finally, Frank Ard's *Opaque Watch* offers a clear view through the woods to the future, perhaps one of our own.

For articles we have…and it appears we've managed to coerce the elusive Geek from his cave with liberal offerings of root vegetables and bad grammar. You should enjoy this one. And don't miss out on our interview with famed Fantasy author Guy Gavriel Kay.

On a final note, please be sure to read the special announcement on the next page. Our best to you, as always.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Many of you have enjoyed Deep Magic since it began in June 2002. We've enjoyed publishing it and hope to continue publishing it with your help. We have tried our best to make the e-zine self-supporting, but we're running out of time and money. We need your help if Deep Magic is going to continue. If not, May 2004 will be our final issue.

This probably comes as a surprise to most of you. From the start, we strived to operate under a business model that allowed us to produce a wonderful e-zine without charging a subscription. Our preference is to continue making it available for anyone to download for free. But since we have not been able to generate sufficient funds, we must shut down the website unless we can change things.

What we would like to do is transform Deep Magic into a non-profit company and request donations from you, our readers. It will cost us a few thousand dollars to make this switch and to fund operations for the next year. Can we persuade enough of you to support us? Would you like to see Deep Magic continue, making the artwork and stories of fantasy and science fiction enthusiasts available to everyone with an internet connection?

Here is what you can do to help.

Send an e-mail to pledge@deep-magic.net and include your name and how much you will pledge to contribute to Deep Magic. You must be eighteen or older or have parental permission to make a pledge.

The pledge drive will last until February 29, 2004. If we have enough pledges to proceed, the pledge givers will be notified, and we will ask that the pledges be honored before the end of March. We will then start the transformation to a non-profit. By doing this, we will apply for 501(c)(3) status from the US Government, which, if approved, will qualify donations to our company as charitable donations for United States tax purposes.

Please help us continue providing "safe places for minds to wander" – we can't do it without your help.

Questions or words of support can be posted on our Message Board here.

Warmest regards,

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. ***Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers.*** We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

February 2004 Writing Challenge

As we learned in Cecelia Dart-Thornton's article in January's issue, words can be powerful. But can a single word be powerful enough to create a story? We're about to find out in this month's writing challenge. We will provide a few words, and your job will be to take one of these abstract words and make it concrete by giving it a story. If more than one of these words inspire you, feel free to incorporate them into the story. The words to choose from are: Injustice, Ambition, Betrayal, Redemption, Humility.

Bring one or more of these words to life in a story, and keep it to 1000 words.

Selections from the January 2004 Writing Challenge

Cleaning Up
A Thief's Resolution
Resolution
The Resolution of Faulk the Free

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

For the writing challenge this month, let's try something in line with the time of year. It's the New Year, and many of us take this time to make resolutions. Maybe it's something we want to change, or something we want to do for the first time.

The challenge for this month is to take a character of your creation and give him or her a new resolution. Decide what that resolution will be (a change, a new adventure, etc.) and write a scene that explores this desire for change. Convince us why your character takes on this resolution, and do it in 1000 words or less.

Cleaning Up

By João Silva

Now, where did I put those blue windsnake feathers…?' Albermant took-off his long-distance spectacles and laid them on the worktable in front of him, exchanging them for the short-distance ones that rested on his bald head. 'Hmm... that's funny, I could swear they were around here somewhere…'

'How many times have I told you to clean up your worktables, Albermant? I'm surprised you manage to find anything in that mess!' Hildelyn closed the large tome she was reading, putting it on top of a neat stack of similar books on her impeccably clean worktable.

'As many times as I've told you I'm perfectly fine with my special organization system, that you so kindly refer to as "that mess". Ah, here they are!' The short old man smiled, disturbing the many wrinkles in his face, and he dropped the precious blue feathers into the bubbling goblet in front of him. 'You see, Hildelyn dear? My system works perfectly! I keep the reagents close to me and all my research tomes hanging on the wall, safe from harm and where I can read them with my magic long-distance spectacles. Speaking of which, where did I put those…?'

Hildelyn rolled her eyes, releasing a small sigh of frustration. 'They're on the left, near the chumaka-mushrooms.' She saw him looking for the mushrooms for a while and then exchanging spectacles again, wondering how long it would be until he forgot where he had put the short-distance ones this time. 'Have it your way, husband dearest. I just think the greatest mage of all Byrtergonn shouldn't be such a stubborn and sloppy old geezer, but that's just my opinion', she said, grabbing a couple of notes and heading for the large bookshelves.

'You always remind me of your opinions, darling, whether or not I want to hear them, don't you?' He shot a glance at her, watching her climb the stairs to reach the upper bookshelves. 'And are you sure those books are safe? I know you didn't test all of them against the magic trap detector, you never do. Oh, but then again, I'm just a stubborn and sloppy old geezer, what do I know of magic book traps?'

'For once, you're absolutely correct, Albermant.' Hildelyn retorted. 'For your information, I did test some of them, and none were magic.' She grabbed a couple more heavy tomes in her already filled hands. 'They came from a small and ruined library, what are the odds of… Oh!'

Hildelyn accidentally let one of the books fall from her grasp, the old volume dropping to the ground with a swirl of yellowish pages. The sudden change in the weight in her arms and the attempt to grab the falling book made her lose her balance for a moment, and Hildelyn and the remaining books soon made their way to the laboratory's hard floor as well.

'Hildelyn!' Albermant heard the crashing noise and rushed to his wife's aid, spilling the contents of his boiling experiment all over the worktable and the floor. Some of it splashed on his left arm and he cursed, trying to avoid stepping on the hot liquid with his soft-soled shoes.

'Albermant…' Hildelyn moaned, trying to put herself back on her feet. That was the moment she saw the glow in one of the fallen books' pages.

'Albermant!'

The old wizard saw the glow as well and paled, recognizing it immediately. 'There's a trapped monster inside the book! It's trying to get out!' He stopped in his tracks, knowing the book could not simply be closed. 'Star-tree dust! Star-tree dust can seal the book!' He rushed

to his workbenches, frantically looking for the small glass jar that held the precious reagent. His nervous hands fidgeted with his spectacles while he inspected cups, bowls, glass tubes and plates, constantly looking but finding everything but the star-tree dust.

'It's in the last table, on top of the jerarkin box!' Hildelyn cried, trying to use the weight of her small and fragile frame to keep the book closed a little longer.

Albermant fled to the designated table and grabbed the small jar, rushing to his wife's side as soon as he had it. The distance seemed immense and his heartbeats marked the passing of time in a terrible rhythm. Already he could see the book was opening, despite Hildelyn's best efforts.

'Quickly now, spread it on the pages!' she shrieked, her eyes mirroring the terror in her voice. Albermant tried to open the jar, but the lid would not come out. Refusing to waste any more time, he crashed the jar on the magical pages, spreading dust, glass shards and blood all over them. Slowly, the light dimmed and the book closed, its crumpled pages tightly packed. The old couple slumped on the floor, breathing fast, but relieved.

'Dear…' Hildelyn said, taking a look at her husband's wounded hand. 'You're not an old geezer. I know how much you care for me, and I've foolishly put us both in danger. I'll never bring another book into the laboratory unless it has passed all the security tests, no matter where it came from. I promise.'

'I also owe you an apology.' Albermant replied and got on his feet, helping Hildelyn up. 'If you didn't know exactly where I had put the star-tree dust, we might have not made it. I'll gladly help you with the books, if you promise to help me clean up my worktables. No more systems for me.'

A Thief's Resolution

By Douglas Pierce

The guardsman's burly arms swung back and heaved, flinging Galen into the air. He landed hard on the alleyway cobblestone with a loud thump, scattering garbage and sending rats fleeing in every direction.

"Hope ya enjoyed another stay at Ringwall," mocked the large guard in his oafish voice, his crook toothed smile broad, the jowls under his face jiggling with raucous laughter. The manner in which he spoke, so sluggish, was like he was trying to pronounce the words from some book, and failing. "See ya next month, pervert thief scum." With another chuckle, he turned away and slammed the heavy iron doors behind him, sending a metallic clang throughout the narrow alley. Galen, for the first time in weeks, was now alone.

Galen got up, flinging the sticky fruit peelings and trash from his cloak with distasteful, exaggerated swipes of his hands. It felt strange to move his muscles again, and with every movement he felt the sharp twinge of some bruise or other injury. *Borrick may have the brains of a slab of meat*, he thought to himself, *but he can sure give a beating*.

Eyes intent on the jail house door, Galen began to fiddle with something on the inside of his cloak. His fingers found the hidden seam in the thick fabric instantly. Again and again he searched through the secret pocket he had stitched into his cloak, but nothing was there.

"Darn," he sighed, finally giving up on his money purse. The guards who manned Ringwall Prison received meager wages, but at least one of them had compensated for that with a portion of the spoils from Galen's last heist. Then he remembered the thick hands of Borrick, groping him harshly when he had first been checked in. *Borrick*, he thought coldly, his fingers white as his hands clenched. He could see the pig now, stuffing his face on the finest meats and meads that the local tavern had to offer, paid for by *his* jewels.

Galen looked up at the sky and saw that the day's sun was high above, declaring the time to be around midday. A smile snaked its way along his thin lips. He was broke now, but he had plenty of time to plan his next caper. Wealth was only a night away. And, as the fat face of Borrick the guardsman laughed belligerently in his memory, he vowed that this time he would not get caught. This time he would not stop in the room of a rich baron's daughter, laden with her father's jewels, only to have her scream bloody murder when he tried to kiss her oh so sweet looking, luscious lips. In fact, he decided resolutely, he would never get caught again.

With long, driven strides he walked towards the end of the alley, determined to start his preparations at once.

"But first," Galen said, giving his sodden tunic a tear inducing sniff, "It's time for a bath."

Resolution

By Benjamin Adams

Close the door, Warrant Officer. Etherthwaite, is it? Yes, sit down."

Moira sat down. Brigadier General Leddex—tight gray hair, pale gray eyes, frown-wrinkled mouth—steepled her fingers and looked very severe. Probably without even trying, Moira thought.

"I'm going to be blunt, Etherthwaite." She rubbed her nose and leaned back in her chair. "Very bluntly, Etherthwaite, I have a fairish amount to say to you, and I'd just as soon not wrap my tongue around this jawcracker of a surname of yours any more than necessary. So I'm going to drop the formality in this *one instance*"—she glared, as though to emphasize that it would never happen again—"and refer to you as 'Moira.' Clear?"

"Yes sir. Quite."

One half of Leddez's mouth twisted into a wry smile. "I'm old-fashioned. *Ma'am* will do."

Moira smiled herself—inwardly. She'd grated at the reg change herself, when it had come down from the brass two years ago.

"Yes *ma'am*." Maybe Leddex wasn't quite the Gorgon reports had led her to believe.

"Look here, Moira." Leddex paused, pursed her lips—"No. First, you tell me a bit about yourself. What's your degree?"

"Ahh..." Moira looked mildly abashed. "'Theoretical Xenobiology.' MIT offered it briefly, after First Excavation but before Contact. Pretty useless, now, I guess, but it got me an officer's commission."

"Mm. It would do that. *But*,"—her eyes narrowed, and she leaned forward again—"it *wouldn't* get you into the Dwimmers. Now, I daresay the real reason you're here, or at any rate the official reason, is there in your file. I haven't read your file. I don't intend to read your file. I

dislike reading files *almost* as much as I dislike dredging the truth out of real people. However, I have found, through many long years of experience"—the glare again, daring Moira to ask *How many?*—"that the latter works several orders of magnitude better than the former. So here we are. The particular truth I want out of you is: Why are you here? -And I want the real answer, not some patsy-blubbery 'serve-the-earth' hogswollop. So take your time thinking, but don't waste mine talking."

Leddex dropped her glinting eyes, picked up a report, grimaced still further, and began to read. Moira opened her mouth, shut it, and let out her breath in a barely silenced rush. By the flick of the Brigadier General's eyelids, she was positively flying down the first of the report's two pages. But Moira decided she had a good forty-five seconds before Leddex finished, so she closed her eyes, took two deep breaths, and considered.

Leddex was skimming the thoroughly redundant conclusion when she heard an almost-tentative "Ma'am?" and glanced up. Moira still had her eyes closed. "May I...tell you a story?" A smile—grudging, fleeting, but real—glimmered across the General's face, and she grunted an amused affirmative.

So Moira told her. Told her about her internship in the German bio lab, the one that'd been assigned the fossils from Excavation—and not the silly ferns and mosses, either, but the *sentients*, the tool-using humanoids. Told her about the raid by the Technocrat Jihad.

Not the media story—they'd been more interested in the practical impossibility of fourteen raids happening simultaneously, and the theft of the weapons and starships—but what it was *really like*, on the inside: the sanitized brutality of hypnotic interrogation, sonic torture, electrode-induced muscle spasms. Told her how the scientists had cracked, one by one. Told her how the sec guards had been taken out, to a man, in the first five minutes of the assault.

"'Once upon a time,'" Moira's white rage leaked out in a fiercely bitter smile, "I thought that technology could bring peace to the earth. And now—"

Leddex sighed. "Now, you know better."

"*Yes*. Now I know better. There will always be those—those—" she stifled the rage, now cold and deep and black as a singularity—"*people*, who will use it for their own abominable purposes. But—"

"Yes, I see. That's enough. Hm. And you told all that to the recruiters, and they let you into the Dwimmers."

"I... -Yes."

A pause. Then: "I'm sorry, Moira. It's...insufficient." A raised little finger was sufficient to forestall Moira's response. "It's a nice spiel, but all it really boils down to is plain old *revenge*. I give the Technocrats maybe another three years before they cease to be a real threat. If your vengeance can sustain you till then—which I doubt—it certainly won't last any longer. *We* will still have plenty of enemies left...but *you* won't. Understand? -And don't argue, just say yes or no."

Moira gasped like a lungfish for a few seconds, and croaked out a raspy "Yes."

"I'm going to give you two months to come up with something better, to find some sort of resolve, or purpose, or whatever you want to call it. Now,"—her face softened, more than Moira had ever seen before—"I don't do this to everybody. With some I don't have to...and most of the rest will slush out on their own, no matter what I might say. But *you* have promise. I've seen it. I can *smell* it." The wrinkled face hardened again. "So. Two months. Come back when you have a better answer, and we'll talk. Dismissed."

As she walked back to the barracks, Moira, who hadn't been nervous for a moment in the

office, began to sweat harder than she ever had before in her life.

Unsurprisingly, the shower was in use, both aquatically and acoustically. Fortunately, the water drowned out most of the singing. It was Jennifer, of course—a cold-blooded killer in the combat sims, but bubbly as a frappuchino fizz anywhere else. Somehow she heard the door close and poked her dripping head past the curtain. "Guess what, Moira? In all the craziness, we totally forgot! Back on Earth, it's New Year's Day! Made any resolutions yet?"

"No." Moira paused. "I'm... thinking."

The Resolution of Faulk the Free

By Gregory Adams

Do you know the date?" I asked the newcomer.

"It's just past Null," he replied when he had recovered from the fit of gagging that all endured when they first came to this place. The stench was terrific but I had long since grown used to it. "The Year of the Hand has just begun." He was still having trouble keeping his feet as the bilious liquid we were wading in swirled around his thighs. Suddenly the whole place gave a terrific shudder and he lost his footing, tumbling face-first into the goo. "Don't get any in your mouth!" one of the old-timers yelled from the darkness. It's good advice but something he'd learn on his own, over time. A man would survive taking a mouthful of the stuff but he would never forget it.

The newcomer righted himself and began wiping his leather shirt clean with his fingers. The stuff clung to him in long, viscous strands, gumming up his eyes and ears and staining his flesh with small flecks of red scum. He blubbered for a while, clearing his lips and nose by exhaling great gouts of breath, and then spoke. "Can I have my equipment back now?" he asked of the darkness that surrounded him.

"No." an unseen voice called back. The newcomer had been stripped of anything useful when he was still too sickened from the journey to defend himself. He was keeping to the circle of light cast by the magic sword, as most newcomers did, because the darkness frightened them. The blade had belonged to some knight or other who was long dead but his sword glowed on. Those of us who still appreciated a bit of light had stuck it blade-first into one of the solid parts of the ceiling, where it shone brightly as a weak lantern. This was still more light than many of the old-timers could stand, so they remained in the darkness.

"I'll need my gear if I'm going to get out of here." The newcomer said. Someone in the darkness laughed. "It's no jest." The young man replied in a serious tone. "This is Faulk the Free who speaks to you. I have escaped from countless prisons, dungeons, and cells. I have bested magical traps shaped by wizards and eluded the bounty-knights of the frontier. Even the ravenous man-eating trees of Shelas could not hold me long." He peered intently into the darkness, seeking his audience. "You may have heard of me," he added.

One of the unseen voices cursed him to be silent, and the young man sat down dejectedly on a barrel that had been floating past. He looked about and spotted me where I skulked at the edge of the light. "I will be free," he told me. "And when I do get free, this is it for me. No more

adventures." He sighed loudly. "I retire. No riches or reward would be worth ending my days in a place such as this." He stood up from the barrel, which bobbed away in the filth. "That will be my pledge for the Year of the Hand," he announced. "No more adventures." Intrigued by his vigor, I had moved nearer. "You bear witness to my vow," he said, pointing at me. I nodded that I would. "I, Faulk the Free," he began, his face turned towards where the heavens might very well be, "do hereby swear to the nine gods that from this day forward, there will be no more thievery for me. No more journeys into mountains where dragons roost, no more descent into caves where goblins lurk, no more looting ruins where the riches of fallen kingdoms lie. From this day, I will repent from raids against villainous bandit princes, and refrain from pilfering arrogant lords and their opulent palaces." He placed one hand upon his heart. "I do hereby swear this to the nine living gods." He bowed his head in reverence and stood there under the light of the swinging sword, all manner of rubbish and refuse bumping into his legs and slime from his dunking clinging to his hair.

"Admirable." I said.

He grinned at me. "An easy vow for a man who has just been swallowed whole by a dragon to keep, do you agree?"

Again, I nodded.

He began gathering materials and stacking them one atop another—a barrel, a crate, a broken char, part of a wagon the dragon had eaten whole a long time ago. "Well, to keep my vow, I'll have to find a way out of here, then," he said. "No temptation worth resisting in this beast's gullet, I'll wager." He started climbing his uncertain structure, expertly keeping his balance even when the beast who had eaten us turned slightly and everything shook.

When he reached the top of his makeshift ladder, Faulk grabbed the magic sword, pulled it free, and dropped back into the muck. "Are you with me?" His grin told me he appreciated of the irony of the moment, in the light of is recent vow. I shook my head, having made my own vow against adventure a long time ago, when every attempt at escape I had ever witnessed ended in death for those who had tried. "Best of luck to you, then." he said. And with a jaunty salute, Faulk the Free started off deeper into the dragon's belly.

Although he carried the glowing sword, the dragon that had swallowed us is vast and filled with many twists, turns, and other obstructions to sight. I watched him for a while, and the watched the glow of the sword after that, but eventually even this faded from sight, and I have seen no more of him since.

If he is free, I hope that he is has kept his vow. To me he seemed sincere.

Across the Delta

By Jonathan Ruland

There," said Kade. He strode forward through the trees to get a better look at the sparkling, silvery lines of frozen water ahead of him. Behind him, he heard the wagons come to a halt.

"So that's it?" said Mard as he came to stand by his side.

Kade nodded. "Hidria River Delta." He heard the three wagon drivers, Ruuk, Joln, and Evid, approaching behind them. They came to a stop beside him and Mard, and they stared out across the delta. Fine then, let them see this and know what they were getting into. Kade wanted no surprises.

"I don't know, lad," said Mard. "I don't like the look of it at all—we can't even see the other side from here. And it's too tangled up with all those forest islands and rocks—it's like a maze." Kade sighed. What had the man expected?

"You're not supposed to like it, Mard," he said. "And you know what? That makes two of us." He glanced at the other three men, then turned back to Mard. "Probably five of us."

Ruuk shook his head, his face twisted in that ever-present squint of his. "I *really* don't like the look of it, Kade," he said. "I think that's what Mard means—this thing's different, and it's not just the terrain. Have you noticed how it's gotten a lot colder these past couple days?" As if to emphasize the man's point, a cold breeze chilled Kade's face and lifted his cloak. He suppressed a shiver and the urge to pull his cloak tight about him.

"I really don't like the look of it, Kade," he said. "I think that's what Mard means—this thing's different, and it's not just the terrain.

"So it's been cold," said Kade. "That's what happens in winter. And besides, we're heading north."

"You know that's not what I mean, Kade," said Ruuk. "Two days to the south it's barely cold enough for snow, but here it covers everything." He waved his arm over the snowy landscape. The five of them stood almost up to their ankles in the white. "It's like we're going up a mountain, only we've been heading down into a river valley."

Kade's eyes narrowed. "Then it'll be cold," he said. Ruuk shook his head in frustration.

"I don't know," said Joln. Kade turned and saw him turning his hat in his hands. "No one ever comes this way. It's dangerous territory, they say."

"The reason nobody comes this way is because a large caravan wouldn't be able to make it across," said Kade. "And smaller caravans just take the road to Whitebridge because nobody's ever tried this before. Not to mention that all the stories about this place help to keep them away. We, on the other hand, are a small caravan, and we do not have the time to go to Whitebridge." Kade looked back over the three wagons, full of the shipment that was father's last work. It would not be wasted.

"Even if all those stories aren't true," said Mard, "it's still dangerous out there. What if we get lost or the ice breaks up while we're on it?" Mard looked at him as if expecting a reply, but Kade said nothing so he went on. "Don't you think we should just take the road to Whitebridge like everyone else?"

continued on page 28

Featured Artist
Matthew Stawicki

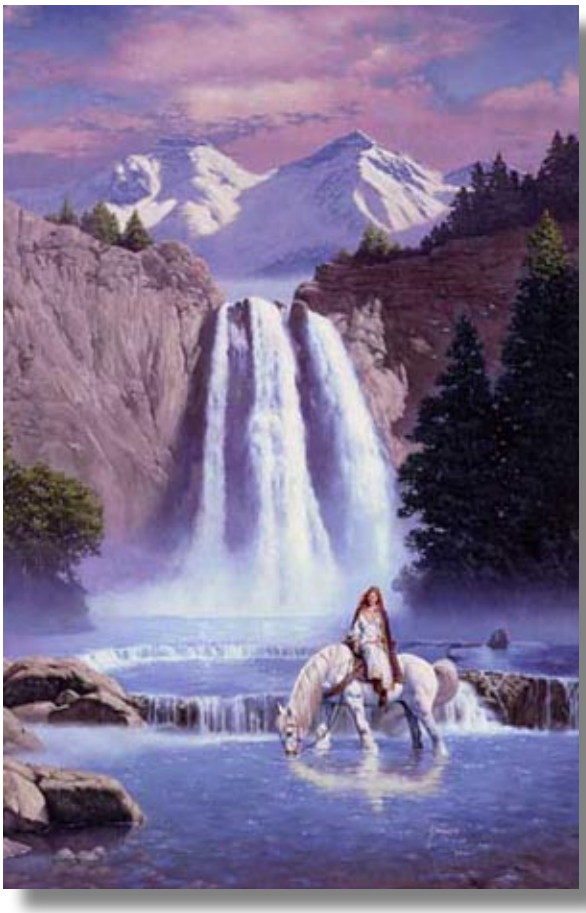
Name: Matthew Stawicki
Age: 34
Residence: East Coast
Marital Status: Married
Children: One Son
Hobbies: Collecting action figures and playing guitar
Favorite Book: Lord of the Rings
Started Painting In: 1990
Artist Most Inspired By: Frank Frazetta
Media You Work In: Digital
Educational/Training Background: Graduated from PA School of Art and Design
Other Training: Understudied with historical/western painter Ken Laager
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Tor, Warner, Roc, Bookspan, Penguin, Bantam, Ace and Ballantine Books as well as products for Hasbro, Milton Bradley, The Franklin Mint, Wizards of the Coast.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: www.Mattstawicki.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I always drew as a kid. I had even done some small local jobs when I was in high school so when the time came to pick a career the choice was pretty clear.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I try to illustrate my images in as realistic a manner as possible. I try draw the viewer into the world that I envision. Although I like many styles of painting it seems that I do this best by developing the world and characters and showing a glimpse into what the scene would look like if you were there.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Like many illustrators the main inspiration for each piece is the product itself, be it a book cover, game cover or whatever. However, I find inspiration

continued on next page



in just about everything around me, from movies and TV to the woods and nature in my area to the work of fellow artists both past and present. For example, I will see a scene in a movie and notice how it is lit or how a particular mood is achieved and think "I've got to try that in a painting." Of course finding the right opportunity to use the inspiration is sometimes a test of patience.

Q: What inspired this cover? (Tell us its story)
A: The piece 'Warrior's Bond' was a painting that was inspired more by the mood I wanted to create than the actual story. This was a case where the deadline was a bit tight and instead of a manuscript I was given character descriptions and a very brief synopsis. This is usually an opportunity to take advantage of something that inspired me other than the story. In this case the art of N.C Wyeth. In his work, among other things, he seems to control the mood by use of light. I wanted the hero and his men to be shown 'in light' and the 'bad guys' to be 'in the shadows'. It's a pretty simple concept but one that I think is very effective (as least when N.C. does it).

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: As I've said, I really have many things that influence me. I love the work of many other artists. The work of N.C. Wyeth and Howard Pyle are among my golden age influences. Some contemporary artists that I admire are James Gurney(who did the Dinotopia series) John Howe and Keith Parkinson. I am also inspired by the work of filmmakers like Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Walt Disney.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: I think the greatest success is being able to continue doing what I am doing. It is very satisfying for me to be able to continue to learn and evolve as an artist. The opportunity to do it for a living is one that I feel very lucky to have. As someone once said "A bad day at this is better than a good day at anything else" and that is very true for me. I did many things along the way to pay the bills when I was getting started in the business so I really appreciate the fact that I now get to 'play' all day.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-fi/Fantasy genre?
A: In general I think the work has become more 'realistic.' I think that with all that has been accomplished in the movie industry with CGI the audience seems to be impressed with very believable images. I think that trend is seen in print art also. The work of today seems to have moved into a more detailed look. For example, artists seem to work more regularly with photo reference and models.

The Opaque Watch

By Frank Ray Ard, Jr.

The sky blurred into an unrecognizable rhythm of deep purple and solid white through the glassy eyes of Kil Elon. His vision often behaved this way, betraying him to mere instinct. This was most troublesome during the times of vigilance, when he was to watch over Mesathine's busiest streets from the fortalice in the center of Daara Sector, as he had been for most of the day.

The day had been long for Kil, full of observant glances and precise stares into the vast web of buildings, streets, and forests. He had used his highly trained eyes throughout the many hours, which had left his mind tired and strained. He knew such rigorous use of his already damaged eyes would not help in recovering the clear vision he had experienced earlier – the kind he was beginning to experience less and less often.

He longed dearly for that clarity, when he could see all of Mesathine and its sister city, Lynthine. He kept a close eye on the forests beyond his home and the interior walkways of the city proper even as the tedium set in over time. When nothing particularly intriguing happened he occupied himself by watching the reactors belch smoke into the sky through a perpetual sequence of up and down momentum.

That was his life. Concealment. He was a watcher, meant to keep study from on high.

Often during that short time the clouds would shift, revealing a gap through which the sun would beat down on the otherwise soothing city. As the sun shone it refracted glitters of light from the abundant metallic surfaces, so intense that it stung the eyes. The light from above gave the scenic terrace a certain brilliance, with the foothills giving way to steep mountain peaks on the western side and groups of carefully decorated buildings at the base that were not entirely formed at the far reaches against the backdrop of the drifting clouds. The clouds moved sluggishly, as if – like Kil – they did not want the scene to end. Kil often felt as if he could reach out and touch a piece of a passing cloud, it seemed so close, so tangible. For this he enjoyed his watch, especially in the early morning before the rigors of the day had set in and the entire scene became mundane.

In this rigorous time, mid-afternoon, Kil silently wished he had not agreed to the surgery. He had thought it would boost his vision. That was what they had told him. The experiment had failed him. It had left him without his most prized possession – always when he needed it the most.

He sat, nearly blind, and looked into the abyss, loathing the treachery of it all. The medical committee had lied with every promise and every assurance they had pushed before him. The so-called breakthroughs were not fail proof, as they had stated. It was just an experiment masked so the naive would be taken in.

He cursed himself. He was a fool. He had been led through the whole process like a child, blinder then than he was now. He alone had let them cut into his eyes, and he alone had believed it would make him a better watcher. He should have seen it when they discontinued the onem scopes. It was to save mesi, for their profit, not his.

continued on page 38

Guy Gavriel Kay
Interview

Age: 49
Residence: Toronto
Marital Status: Married
Children: 2
Hobbies: Obviously, doing online interviews! No, er: film, travel, single malt scotch, baseball...
Personal Quote: "I would rather the Romans ask why there are no statues to Cato, than ask why there are." (Cato the Elder)
Favorite Book or Author: Too many to start singling out.
First time you tried to get something published: 1980-81
Authors Most Inspired By: A myriad of them
Educational/Training Background: Philosophy and law
Schools Attended: University of Manitoba, University of Toronto
Degrees: B.A., LL.B. (Law degree in Canada)
Website URL: (Authorized site, not my own) www.brightweavings.com coordinated by Deborah Meghnagi

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published.
A: I had drafted about 7 chapters of The Summer Tree when the man who was acting as my agent (we'd met during the promotional launch for The Silmarillion, which I had helped edit) decided enough was in place for him to send it off. It was accepted first by David Fielder of Allen & Unwin in London, then by David Hartwell at Arbor House, NY, and Linda McKnight of McClelland & Stewart in Canada. This, incidentally, established the separation of all three major English language markets (Australia goes to the British, usually) from the start of my career, which has helped me immensely.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: In significant and ongoing ways, yes. Some good, some... time-consuming! There's been a huge change in reader expectations over the past decade (more or less) in terms of the belief that it is possible and even appropriate to be in direct touch with a writer whose work one admires. When I was growing up, or in university, it didn't enter my mind to have such a personal communication. Today, I receive emails from readers saying that they have JUST finished a book of mine and have various comments and queries. These are very often seriously intelligent (I have seriously intelligent readers) and that's a problem ... because clever queries and comments pretty much compel a reply! In addition, it goes the other way: many writers wade into usenet discussions actively, even discussions of their own books. One author I know threw out a query to the usenet sf discussion group as to the merits of splitting a book of his into two volumes, how they (the readers) would feel about this. The back-and-forth is staggeringly different today.

continued on next page

Q: Your worlds and kingdoms are very rich in the arts (music, poetry, artwork, etc.) and have a very Renaissance feel. Were you a history major, and what has been your inspiration for the settings?
A: I majored in Philosophy, then did law, but history has always been a passion, in many different forms. My major reading, both leisure and professional is in history. I often say that if you are doing a fantasy based on a period, a variation on a theme, as it were, you have to KNOW the theme before you try variations! Only one of my books is actually 'Renaissance-based' and that's TIGANA (and even there, the idea blurs, because I introduced a Politburo-style dictator in one of the invaders). I've done medieval Spain and France/Provence and Late Antiquity in Byzantium in others. The new book, THE LAST LIGHT OF THE SUN, due out in March, takes its inspiration from the north of Europe well before the Norman Conquest of England. And yes, indeed, the interplay of power and the arts is a recurring theme for me. I like to play with this in various ways, showing how it spins itself out differently, in different cultures.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters?
A: That sets up the usual, 'How can a father choose amongst his own children?' reply. It happens to be true, though. Hmm. I suspect if pushed I'd name Dianora in TIGANA the most tragic figure I've created. Um. Well, along with Darien in FIONAVAR. (See what I mean?) I was very happy with Styliane Daleina in the Mosaic as a creation ... someone you genuinely dislike all through but (I hope) are compelled towards a grudging respect for by the end. I had a lot of fun with Bertran de Talair in ARBONNE. Actually, a lot of the figures in ARBONNE appeal to me ... it was probably the most enjoyable book to write, a love song to Provence, essentially.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: One of those questions that requires an essay not a paragraph. Without dodging it, I'll say one obvious, powerful thing, is getting older. We think and feel differently as time passes for us, and we write differently, accordingly.

Q: What have you been reading lately?
A: I'm currently re-reading Shirley Hazzard's THE TRANSIT OF VENUS. She just won the National Book Award for her new novel (THE GREAT FIRE) - her first book in 23 years! TRANSIT OF VENUS is exquisite, stylistically brilliant, deeply compassionate ... one of my favourite novels back when, and I am so relieved to find I still love it, two decades later. (This is not a fantasy book, by the way, and won't be everyone's cup of tea.) I'm also immersed in my usual slew of books on various periods of history and was just sent the new Gene Wolfe novel, due out in the spring, by his publisher.

Q: How much of your time do devote to writing?
A: All my work time is writing now. I'm at it every day, pretty much, when in the middle of a book.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: Terror? In truth, I stay at the desk. Don't get up. Muddle it through. Remind myself that inspiration is overrated, is often an excuse for dodging the work. Books are marathons not sprints, there will be days, there MUST be days when you don't feel razor-sharp, and you can't

continued on next page

just take those days off. Or, I can't.

Q: Your work has strong sexual themes (Tigana, A Song for Arbonne, Lions of Al-Rassan, as examples) - what has been your reader reaction to the explicit material in your work?
A: As you might expect, response varies widely. Sexuality is one of the touchstone issues that makes one conscious of how much fiction writing (all art, really) is a dialogue, not a monologue. The reader/consumer brings his or her own history, taste, passions, antipathies to the table. One reader's eroticism is another's boredom and another's pornography. One reader will pick up on the 'point' of a given scene, write a thesis on it, another will think it is cheap salaciousness. You cannot, as a writer, control this. And it doesn't only apply to sexuality. Quick example: the sexual elements of TIGANA are a central motif of that novel, spun out of the ways in which being conquered, subjugated politically, can ripple down to the smallest, most private elements of human existence, and many people have written and spoken of this (read Milan Kundera's early fiction). It felt entirely right to me to make use of this in the novel, in a variety of ways. Some readers have responded to the theme, others haven't been able to 'see' it because they react too viscerally to the fact of sexuality in the novel. On the whole, I think that over time an element of self-selection operates in this, after a writer has been around for awhile: readers come to know whether a given author satisfies their own needs in terms of the reading experience. I feel very lucky in my readers, around the world. They offer a measure of affirmation that keeps me exploring the themes and motifs that engage me, knowing that they seem to also engage a great many other people.

Lost In Shadow

By Sean T. M. Stiennon

Tomhas Chandlerson crept slowly up the last few feet that stood between him and the summit of the outcropping, his gloved fingers quaking. At last, he reached the small plateau and slowly stood up. He had to be careful not to slip, for the rock was stained with ice and blanketed with snow. The wind was more intense at that height, and there were no sheltering trees to lessen its force. Tomhas shivered as his eyes followed the horizon in its great circle, made jagged by the trees. Nothing. No sign of light, no great hills rising above the foliage, no open plains. Nothing but the vast, impenetrable bulk of the winter-wrapped forest.

Tomhas let a growl fall out of his mouth to be taken up by the wind and blown away into the night. The sun had vanished long ago, and for every hour since he had wandered. Yet still, there was no sign of his village or any other, nor even a solitary campfire. The Friwold Woods could not extend this far -- perhaps he was making circles in his journeying. But he had seen none of his own tracks, and the snow was not driving hard enough to obscure them that quickly. He had already cursed his poor judgment, and he did it again. If only he had stayed in his cabin for the night, instead of setting out after his family in the village. If only he had not kept working until after nightfall.

He shuddered and began to descend the tor by the same path that he had come up. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness long ago, and even under normal circumstances his night vision was better than that of most men. But still, he did not notice a patch of ice nestled in deep shadows, and he slid the rest of the way down on his fur-cloaked back.

Memories of dark legends flittered around the edges of his thought, growing stronger the more he tried to suppress them.

He hit the snow with a soft thump. It was deep enough to cushion his fall, and he survived with only a few scrapes and bruises. They wouldn't make walking any more pleasant, but he was not seriously injured. Tomhas set off into the darkness of the woods once more.

As he walked, he found his hand stealing down to where his hatchet rested, thrust through his thick belt and nestled against his dull red tunic. He took his hand away. He would not give in to fear, not yet. But still, he thought he could faintly hear the patter of feet, and sometimes he was certain that cold eyes were following his every step. Once, some time ago, his fear had grown so intense that he had doubled back and hid, to see if he could catch a sight of his trackers. Nothing. But as soon as he had started out again, the sensation of being hunted continued. He once again regretted leaving his big axe back at the cabin.

The sensation was still with him now. Memories of dark legends flittered around the edges of his thought, growing stronger the more he tried to suppress them. There were many stories told of the Friwold woods, and many of them were not pleasant, tales of hauntings and fell murders in the depths of the forest. Most sounded absurd to men sitting before a roaring fire with mugs of cold beer and their friends and family gathered around, but to Tomhas, alone in the very heart of the woods at night, they were more difficult to discredit.

continued on page 57

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do it register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Bitterbynde Trilogy (The Ill-Made Mute, The Lady of the Sorrows, and The Battle of Evernight)

By Cecilia Dart-Thornton

A good many debut fantasy novels start off with a cliché to try and pull a reader into a story. There are standards and unspoken rules that try to outline how to hook a chapter, how to avoid unneeded adverbs, and how start off on a romp of a pace. As the green writer matures and masters the craft, the rules are shrugged off. In Cecilia Dart-Thornton's *Bitterbynde Trilogy*, she manages to shrug them off in her first book and creates a strong authorial voice that ties the three-book story arc into a masterful whole.

Her main character begins the trilogy as an antithesis of the word cliché. She's mute, horribly disfigured, and cannot remember anything about her past. In fact, she doesn't even get a name until well after the first hundred pages. She was discovered near the domains of Isse Tower, though not as a baby, and so she is set at work doing the most menial of jobs in the scullery, laughed at and teased by the salt of the world – a vibrantly painted world of continents known by the name Erith.

The kingdoms share something in common. They are plagued by magical creatures called *wights*. The friendly are known as Seelie wights, the nasty and hurtful ones, the Unseelie wights. Humans are unwelcome additions to the world, and the wights delight in tormenting them with illusions. To wander the woods alone without knowing the different kinds of wights is a perilous thing. And if the terrors of wightdom were not enough, the planet itself wreaks havoc with the weather: things go mad when the *shang* wind blows. Emotions of humankind are captured by the winds and painted into the air like ghosts – unless one is wearing a *taltry*, a cap made of special metallic mesh that hides one's thoughts from the shang wind. These ghostly scenes are replayed over and over, even hundreds of years later. The people have thus learned to always tighten their taltries. Horses and ships levitate and fly because of a special substance that can defy the effects of gravity. But for some reason, the ill-made mute knows none of these things.

The first name the ill-made mute gets in the trilogy is Imrhien, given by a stout-hearted Ertishman named Sianadh who takes her under his wing and teaches her to communicate with sign-language. They wander the dangerous woods together, searching for a secret treasure the Ertishman knows of. Their journeys bring them together with Sianadh's extended family, who know of a *carlin*, the druid-like wizards of Erith, near the royal city of Caermelor who might be able to cure her disfigured face and restore her speech. But on the journey to Caermelor, they experience an uprising of Unseelie hosts. The horrible wights are hunting for something…or someone. While in desperate straits in the woods, Imrhien is separated from the family, except for one, Diarmid. While lost in the woods, their plight is discovered by a Dainnan ranger named Thorn who protects them from the dangers of the forest and guides them to Caermelor.

The Dainnan are the elite knights of the King Emperor of Caermelor, mustered to fight against the growing threat of the Unseelie wights. Their skills of surviving are legendary, and Thorn's protection is the only thing that could save them on her journey. Traveling with such a man, Imhrien feels the first stirrings of love

continued on next page

in her heart. But how could a man so accomplished and dynamic ever care for a misshapen creature such as herself? Book one ends with Thorn and Imhrien parting at the carlin's cottage near the king's city.

In book two, *The Lady of the Sorrows*, Imhrien gains a new face, her voice, and a new name – but not her memories. Disguising herself to guard against those hunting her, she assumes the role of Rohain, the Lady of the Sorrow Islands – a kingdom distant from that of the king emperor. It turns out that her discovery of the fortunes with Sianadh were worth much to the kingdom and she is rewarded with rank and station. Secretly, she hunts for word of Thorn but the machinations at court prevent her from finding him. All of the Dainnan have been summoned to face a mighty host of Unseelie wights that gather in the east. It is while she stays among the nobility that she learns about the Faeran high king. The Faeran are an elf-like race, immortal and more powerful than the wights, who have been shut away from their world. Somehow her past is connected with theirs as she struggles to uncover the riddle of her own identity. She and Thorn are reunited before the Unseelie army attacks. Because of the threat of war, she is taken for protection to a secret island. But the Unseelie will stop at nothing to get at her and the island is compromised. Again she must flee those seeking her, still not knowing why. Her flight brings her back near the place where she was discovered and put to work at Isse Tower. And then her memories start to return. And she realizes that she does not know the world because she has been away from it for so long.

In the final book, *The Battle of Evernight*, the secrets all begin to come together. Imhrien learns that she is being hunted by a Faeran lord, one of the banished ones, because she alone can open the gates back their fair country. The entire world roils with conflict as the two Faeran brothers, the high king and the raven prince, seek to claim her as her own. She has a new name now, the name of her childhood, the name of her past, but she disguises it yet again to seek answers, to fill the gaps in her newly restored memory. And the answers are to be found in the lair of the Raven Prince himself, in the shadowy land called Evernight.

Cecilia Dart-Thornton's writing has been compared to Tolkien by many critics. I would have to agree with them, because she breaks new ground that fantasy authors have failed to do in years. Her use of Celtic myths and language add a brightly beautiful backdrop to the story. The language is rich and complex – it is not any easily gulped down set of novels. There are reminiscences of Tolkien throughout the story, but as any good author must do, she stamps them in her own molds and breathes life and tension into them. The initial parts of each book are a little slow as new settings and new characters are introduced. But the pacing in each picks up drastically, the tension mounting as new discoveries and twists are made. I found the love story angle with Thorn to be a bit heavy handed, but not unrealistic given the setting. The books are full of surprising twists that can leave you dizzy with the implications. And the final resolution is delayed until the very last page which made it practically unbearable because it balanced on a knife-point. The ending was cryptic enough than many of her readers didn't understand how it ended. But only because it was written so subtly. It is one of the best new fantasy series I've read in years.

Possible objectionable material: None. One of the most Disney-clean series I've ever read.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

Book Review: Science Fiction
Under Alien Stars
By Pamela F. Service

This science fiction adventure is geared toward young adults. Other, more recognized works of the author include *Stinker from Space* and the fantasy *Vision Quest*. But *Under Alien Stars* holds its own in characters and story. The author introduces the readers to a conquered world, Earth. However, to the conquerors, the Tsorians, Earth is nothing more than a small outpost, and Aryl, daughter of the Tsorian commander, doesn't like being on the world with wrongly colored oceans and skies any more than Jason, son of a Tsorian 'sympathizer,' likes

continued on next page

having the purple-skinned Tsorians controlling his home. The story is seen through the eyes of both Jason and Aryl, each with their own trials to overcome. Jason is ashamed of his mother's working with the Tsorians and despises the fact that she seems to take no offense to their conquerors, his father having passed away in a plane crash -- or so he's been told. He wishes he could join the Resistors, a group secretly working to remove the Tsorians presence. For Jason, though, life on Earth continues much as it had before the Tsorians attacked, that is, until his mother reveals the true reason for his father's death, forcing him to come to grips with it in more ways than one.

Aryl struggles to follow in her father's footsteps, as she has chosen to be apprenticed to him, in the Tsorian way. She longs for her foster homeworld while dealing with the Tsorian politics that surround her father's position and wishing her father would be given a more exciting assignment. But, as the saying goes, be careful what you wish for. Both their worlds are turned even more upside-down when the Resistors plot to hold Aryl's father hostage and contact another alien race, the Hykozi, known to be an enemy of the Tsorians. The Resistors, though, do not realize the full impact their small rebellion will have, as they call the dangerous Hykozi to Earth and hurl the Tsorians' small outpost into turmoil, centering Earth as a battling ground for the two alien races, a skirmish in which both Jason and Aryl inevitably end up playing an important role.

The author delves well into the teenage minds of both Aryl and Jason, effectively showing their differing points of view. Slowly revelations are made to the characters about themselves and the world around them, and they change accordingly. Tsorians do not differ too much in appearance from humans, though Aryl keenly notes as her character develops that it is their similarities that makes their differences stand out all the more. Jason, for his part, slowly learns that he can no longer simply view the world in terms of the "evil conquering Tsorians" versus the "righteous defenders of earth;" indeed he comes to understand the gray areas that lie between perceptions of what constitutes right and wrong, good and evil. The story moves along at an easy pace, setting the stage for the ensuing battle and drawing Aryl and Jason into the conflict. It brings to light such issues as cultural differences, perceptions and philosophies, yet keeps the readers attention with character deepening or action. A nice reprieve, the ending is not a complete ending so to speak, but instead another unrealized beginning. It leaves the field open, while closing the story in a satisfying manner.

Possible objectionable material: None.

(Reviewed by J.W. Wrenn)

Book Review: Classic Science Fiction

The Illustrated Man

By Ray Bradbury

When I read Ray Bradbury as a kid, I wrote like Ray Bradbury--everything green and wondrous and seen through a lens smeared with the grease of nostalgia." --Stephen King, *On Writing*

Ray Bradbury is considered to be one of the giants of the fantasy, sci-fi, and horror worlds, and that is indeed saying a lot. For one man to encompass three genres all by himself is a feat that staggers a writer's mind. Yet Bradbury does that in his writing, and *The Illustrated Man* is a perfect brainchild of his capabilities and imagination.

The book is a series of short stories set and illustrated on the body of a stranger the narrator meets in the prologue. The stranger is the Illustrated Man of the title, a cursed human who was tattooed by a witch. The Illustrated Man claims the witch was from the future. "So he sat all night while her magic needles worked as wasp stings and delicate bee stings" until every inch of him was covered in colors that burned in three dimensions. It was only afterwards that he found the paintings, talked and moved and squirmed and told stories to any one who cared to watch them for more than half an hour.

So the narrator sits and watches the pictures while the Illustrated Man sleeps, and soon the pictures begin to move, tiny mouths of tiny people flicker, and the voices rise, small and muted. Sixteen illustrations, sixteen

continued on next page

tales. The first illustration quivers and comes to life...

So begin the stories, sixteen of them, ranging from stark terror to baffling wonderment...and none of them disappoints. "The Veldt" takes the reader to a nursery designed by the best of scientific minds, which uses telepathy, odorophonics, and other technological means to solidify the rantings of a child's mind into three-dimensional reality, dreams of Africa into an African veldt where lions roam and hunt. "The Other Foot" is a black-and-white story that describes the ousting of black people from the womb of mother Earth, how they all go to Mars and inhabit the planet, and how humans destroy Earth and the white Americans then go to Mars beseeching their old slaves and janitors and victims to accept them, but the black folk remember their own misery and terror, and plan vengeance on them. "Usher II" is a salute to Poe's "House of Usher" and describes a rich madman's attempt to create the House of Usher physically incorporating, however, all the key horrors in Poe's other stories like "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Ape," "The Cask of Amontillado" and so on.

Most of the stories in the book are sci-fi inter-mixed with fantasy and horror elements. All of them are written in Bradbury's unique style: simple, colorful, effective, and tinged with unease. Most are set on other planets. All are reminders of what Earth can be or become.

Possible objectionable material: None

(Reviewed by Usman Tanveer Malik)

Book Review: Fantasy

Path of Fate

By Diana Pharaoh Francis

In the land of Kodu Riik, the goddess, the Blessed Lady Amiya, exerts her will and beneficence through two different avenues. First, there are the healers, tarks, who use the science of medicine to bring health to the people. Second, there are the *ahalad-kaaslane*, prophets of a sort, who wander the land with their animal bondmates, dispensing the Blessed Lady's justice and will.

Young Reisil has just completed her training as a tark and is ready to settle down and establish her practice. Abandoned at birth, Reisil has never felt she had a place in society until now. By becoming a tark, she feels she can be a valued contributor to the life of her village. However, one day a goshawk shows up and invades her mind, claiming to be her *ahalad-kaaslane*, an animal bondmate sent from the Blessed Lady. Reisil doesn't want this, to live the nomadic life of the goddess's prophets, having no one except a goshawk close to her, no place to call home. So she tries to deny Amiya's blessing.

Kodu Riik, however, has been at war with neighboring Paverseme for many years, a bloody, horrific war, and a truce has finally been declared. A delegation from Paverseme is passing through Reisil's village on its way to the signing of the peace treaty when the daughter of one of the delegates is kidnapped, jeopardizing the process. Reisil quickly finds herself caught up in the intrigue and is forced by circumstances to accept the goshawk as her *ahalad-kaaslane*.

No one is certain which side (or both) did the kidnapping, so a combined group of Kodu Riikians and Paversemese, with Reisil prominent among them, head out to find the kidnapped girl and salvage the peace treaty.

What results is a well-written and fascinating exploration of the relationship of fate and individualism, coupled with a gripping story of political intrigue. Before the story is over and the novel closes, Reisil has to come to grips with being doubly blessed by her goddess, as well as knowing what her own desires are. As with good novels, though, the themes and the plot do not conflict with one another, but instead play off each other in a stunning symphony of emotion and adrenaline. If this were a novel worried solely about plot, it would still have been enjoyable, but first-time author Diana Pharaoh Francis shows that she has the skill to balance both theme and plot.

Perhaps the one thing holding up the novel the most, though, is the strong characters. The story is told through the third-person point of view of Reisil. As a result, we see not only the characters themselves grow, but also Reisil's view of them. At no time does the reader feel he is getting only Reisil's point of view, nor just the

continued on next page

narrator's point of view, but both come through in equal force throughout.

The weakness of the book, however, is the middle section. Perhaps I'm just getting sensitive to the demands of good plotting; perhaps I'm reading too many books for review. Whatever the case, I've been noticing a lot of books recently that loose steam in the middle section of the book and turn toward character to the neglect of plot. *Path of Fate* doesn't quite succumb to that plague, but it almost does, with a middle section weaker than the opening and concluding portions of the book.

But don't let this scare you off from reading a strong debut novel. I've seen advertisement for a sequel coming out later this year and I will definitely be adding it to my list of books to read this year!

Possible objectionable material: deals with issues of rape, but never forces the reader to view the actual act. Also, there is a mildly explicit demon conjuring toward the end.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Young Adult Fantasy
The Amulet of Samarkand, Book One of the Bartimaeus Trilogy
By Jonathan Stroud

The Amulet of Samarkand is set in London, England, a country ruled by magicians. All the power these magicians wield comes from the djinni they summon and bind to do their will.

Nathaniel has been studying as an apprentice magician for the past five years or so. One day his master Arthur Underwood presents him to some fellow magicians. Magician Simon Lovelace proceeds to humiliate Nathaniel, and his master does nothing to protect him.

After this betrayal, Nathaniel ceases to regard Arthur Underwood as his true master. He looks to his books to guide and teach him and begins plotting his revenge on Lovelace. After a year of intense training, Nathaniel feels prepared to put his plans into action.

He summons Bartimaeus, a Djinni, and bids him to steal the Amulet of Samarkand from Lovelace. Nathaniel is certain that Lovelace has obtained the Amulet through murder and intrigue. He believes that if he can take it away from Lovelace and reveal that Lovelace obtained it, that it will ruin Lovelace. He has no idea what his actions have started.

This story is told through two points of view that shift back and forth. Bartimaeus' portions of the story are told in first person, Nathaniel's in third person.

The writing is strong, clear and easily understood. Characters are well developed, and the story is well paced. The only thing I thought to be lacking was originality. All the elements of this story are found in other works.

My favorite element of this story is Stroud's use of unusual and imaginative descriptions. For example, he used the expression "peeing with rain" to describe a lamppost during a rain shower.

Possible objectionable material: Magical system revolves around the use of demons. Bartimaeus considers appearing to Nathaniel as a naked woman.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

Book Review: Science Fiction
Trading in Danger
By Elizabeth Moon

Kylara Vatta has a bad habit of trusting where she shouldn't. She is an honorable person, and assumes that other's motivations are as honorable as her own. Her most recent bungle has caused the military to be cast in a terrible light, and it is all over the media. As a result Kylara has been forced to resign from the Naval Academy.

continued on next page

To get her away from the media, Kylara's family assigns her as captain of one of their cargo ships, the *Glennys Jones*. Her assignment is to take the *Glennys Jones* to Lastway and sell her for salvage. She'll deliver cargo on the way out, drop off the ship, and she and the crew will come home on commercial transport. The entire trip should take eleven months, and give the story plenty of time to die down.

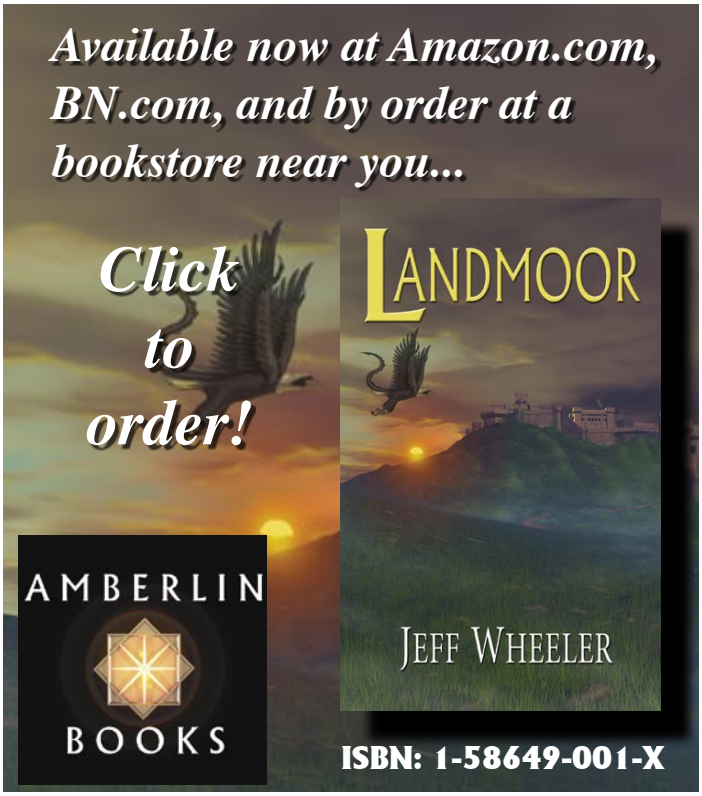
Kylara figures captaining the *Glennys Jones* is pretty much just truck driving in space. From the beginning of her journey, she tries to figure out how to turn enough of a profit trading to enable her to refit the ship, and save it from going to salvage. In the course of trading, Kylara finds herself in the midst of a planetary civil war. Here her military experience provides her with the skills she needs to save herself, her ship and her crew.

Elizabeth Moon's writing style really reminds me Anne McCaffrey's.

Trading in Danger doesn't examine social issues, nor does the character come to any deep realizations of herself. This story is just plain fun. The characters are believable, and the story has lots of action and adventure from beginning to end. The only thing I didn't like about this book is a very small side story about some fruitcakes. It was just too silly.

Possible objectionable material: None, some violence in military context. Not graphic.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)



Deeper Magic - A collection of short stories from the first year of Deep Magic.
DEEPER MAGIC
THE FIRST COLLECTION
Click to order!

The Geek's Guide to Grammar
Were/Was & the Subjunctive

I have always struggled with the use of 'was' and 'were.' It seemed that whenever I was confident of a correct usage, I would be corrected. So I decided to do a little research. As it turns out, I was likely neither right nor wrong. It's all a matter of whether or not you feel the subjunctive in English grammar is dead or still kicking.

If Aidon were a stronger man, he would not have run from the Orcs.

Is the above correct? Should it have read, "If Aidon *was* a stronger man"? Well, the use of 'were' goes back to the subjunctive mood (versus the Indicative mood of 'was'). A simple definition would be a use that is wishful, hypothetical, or an unreal statement. **If I were a rich man… Were we to do things differently…** Both are examples of the subjunctive. And the subjunctive is unfortunately dying.

If I was smarter, I would have aced Wizard's school.

Today, that's a perfectly acceptable statement. But only because of its common use (which tends to dictate changes in the English language these days). However, it would be more proper to use the subjunctive. You would then phrase it, "If I *were* smarter"…

So, there are two issues here. 1) How do you recognize a subjunctive when it comes along and 2) Does it matter? Here are my thoughts.

1. Recognizing the subjunctive is tough in modern English, but it's there. Just look for a sentence where there is a wish, hypothetical, or unreal statement is being displayed. Key words to look out for are *if*, *as if*, *as though*, and similar words or phrases (there are many more, by the way).

2. Yes, it does matter. I'm all for language evolving, but the subjunctive is very important. Without it, we are left with all our statements being Indicative, meaning they 'indicate' a mood, rather than making a mood subjective. It's not worth losing this part of our language over lazy word usage.

So that's it. This is a perfect example of the convoluted state of the English language. Keep in mind, I've really only focused on the 'was/were' aspect of the subjunctive. There is much more. I certainly don't begrudge the use of 'was' instead of 'were,' but I do think it's important to understand the rule and its evolution. If for no other reason, next time you are incorrectly corrected, you can tell them why they're wrong…

Ask the Geek

Do you have a grammar question for The Geek? This is the place to ask. Simply send an email, and he'll respond. Be prepared, because your question may be printed in a future issue.
EMAIL THE GEEK

Exile Into Hope

By Nektarios Chrissos

"A hundred times will the world by seasons be traversed,
Five weapons magical, five champions, their fear shall be reversed,

Wolves under a full moon shall grieve, for other wolves that perish,
Ashes now, the Sons of Blood, in four winds will vanish,

Children of Earth, and of the Sky, with mighty wings were flying,
They lit the skies with their flames, returning back and dying,

Shadows of Souls, black as the coal, but of humans when alive,
Now exiled to the Antiworld, were plotting in their hive.

Dead that walk the world alive, to oblivion departed,
drawing tears of remembrance, from their kin they parted,

"--So will all these, be true for good -- Men will -- in Ilfion -- in -- stay!"

The Leader of Men, with hands crossed on his chest, looked at the incomplete oracle of the Speechless Prophet, written with blood on charred skin. The old writing was hanging behind his ramshackle wooden throne in the Hall of Councils of the Tower of the Crimson Mist.

In the last bastion of humanity.

The old Leader frowned. He was alone in the once majestic -- now empty -- hall. He looked up at the ceiling and saw the detailed murals that depicted the emblems of the Five Tribes of Men surrounding bright Ilfis, the sun of Ilfion. Then he looked around, seeing the sets of weapons, gifts of the Tribes leaders to the Union, resting inside dusty alcoves in the weathered marble walls.

Outside the tower, in the yard of the castle of The High Mountain and beyond, four great armies, the last warriors of men, were waiting patiently for him to come out and speak.

He turned and walked towards the round table in the middle of the room. He saw five swords drawn and carved on the stony surface, the tip of their blades pointing at the bright sun on its center.

Five Tribes of Men under the sun and its enlightenment.

All of them now on the verge of extinction.

Outside the tower, in the yard of the castle of The High Mountain and beyond, four great armies, the last warriors of men, were waiting patiently for him to come out and speak. To inspire bravery into them. To give them courage. To offer them a motive so that they would march on lower ground, far from the mountain and its last castle, away from the last tower, and

continued on page 65

continued from page 12

"No," said Kade, irritation rising within him; Mard knew the answer to that question already, and the men seemed to be growing more hesitant the more they talked. They hadn't come this far to turn back now. "Going through Whitebridge could take months, as you well know, and we need to get this shipment to Grenasti before the market goes bad. And I think it's time we got to it. Let's go." He stepped forward down the slope; after a moment Mard stepped into place beside him, and he heard the wagons rolling behind them. In a few minutes they reached the bottom of the slope and stepped onto the ice. If Kade had expected the wind to be weaker down in the delta, he was wrong. It was stronger, and the air was even colder. Fine then, let it be colder. He would not waste Father's last work.

* * *

"Looks like snow," said Mard. And it did—Kade had been watching the clouds to the north for the past couple of hours. But this would be their first bad news so far; they had already gone at least fifteen miles north in the eight hours they had been traveling across the delta. And it didn't look like heavy snow either—just a shower. Perhaps by now his men would see that there really was nothing to fear. In two, maybe three more days they would be on the other side, and they would get the shipment to Grenasti. *I am going to do it, Father*, he thought. *I won't let it be wasted.*

Kade glanced at the sun, sitting low on the western horizon as it cast long shadows. "We should find a place to spend the night soon," he said. "That island ahead of us is as good as any." In twenty minutes they had reached the island, and they found an open patch between the trees and began to set up their camp. As they were preparing dinner, Kade felt a snowflake brush against his cheek. Another followed it, and another. Soon the air was filled with them, and the men began wrapping their cloaks tight around them.

"It's just a snow shower," said Kade. "It will be over soon -- there's nothing to worry about." Nothing to worry about with the snowfall, or the delta in general. Nothing at all.

The men said nothing for a moment, but presently Mard spoke. "I don't know, lad," he said. "Your father didn't take risks like this, didn't do things with so much uncertainty."

Why did the man have to compare him to his father?

"There is no uncertainty," said Kade coldly. "And I'm not my father." Mard looked at him silently for a moment, and Kade looked back. At last the man nodded and turned away.

The night deepened, and the snow continued to fall. A new layer of it was forming around them, and it dusted their cloaks and hats as the men finished eating.

"I can take the first watch," said Kade. "Then Joln, then Mard, and tomorrow night it will be Ruuk then Evid, then me again." The men nodded, and with that decided they spread out their pallets very close to the fire -- it was getting colder—and one by one they dropped off to sleep.

The snow continued to fall—it might have even gotten heavier. Kade had thought it would have stopped by now. It grew colder too, and the wind picked up and blew the falling snow into his eyes. He wrapped the cloak tight about him and drew the hood over his head. He could deal with the cold, and he knew his men could deal with it, too. He knew that they didn't want his father's last work to be wasted either, and they could learn to shrug off the discomfort—and he was *not* going to give up over a little discomfort.

The snow swirled about him, and now he was sure it was much heavier than before.

Ruuk muttered and turned over, pulling his blankets over his face, then lay still. Kade began to shiver, and he huddled closer to the fire. The cold darkness pressed in about him—except where the faint glow illuminated the trees ahead of him.

His eyes locked on the white light that shone off the trees and snowflakes. It flickered gently, and it seemed to be moving toward him. The glow intensified and lit more of the woods. His eyes widened; it looked as if a figure was stepping slowly toward him through the wood. He wanted to get up, wanted to yell to the men, but he couldn't move—or could he? He simply did not rise. His eyes were locked on the approaching figure. It reached the edge of the trees and stopped. Kade's mouth parted; it was his father.

And it *was* his father. The figure was like him in every way, down to the plain brown shirt and gray breeches he always wore. Father stared at him silently, and Kade stared back. He looked so sad, as if he wished that Kade would stand and come to him after he had missed him for so long. But it couldn't be Father; Father was dead. Kade had been there when he died. This figure before him was not his father.

As if the figure had understood Kade's thoughts, a tear slid slowly from his eye and fell to the ground, and pain shot through Kade's heart. He had missed him so much, and he wanted to go to him, to embrace him—but it wasn't his father!

"No!" he said. Suddenly he sat alone, with the four other men around him. The figure and the glow were gone without a trace, as if they had never been.

Ruuk snorted, raised his head, and stared at Kade, his eyes heavy with sleep. "What is it?" he said. Kade looked around for the figure, but it was gone; a few snowflakes fell silently about them, now less than a flurry. Had it been a dream?

Kade shook his head. "Nothing," he said. Ruuk scowled and let his head drop. A moment later he was asleep again.

Kade's mind was filled with the image that was his father as he sat his watch. It must have been a dream; what else could it have been? But it had been more real, more vivid than any dream he could remember, and he could still feel the pain that he felt when he knew that it was his father. When the time finally came to wake Mard and go to his pallet, he slept and dreamed dreams of his father's death.

* * *

When he woke the next morning, he could not remember his dreams—they seemed to blur together into one long dream of the death of his father. He tried to shake the feeling off him as he and the rest of the men prepared to leave. Had the figure last night been one of his dreams? If it had been, it was the one dream he could remember. Had any of the other men dreamed strange dreams or seen things? He stole glances at the other men: Joln was silent, keeping to himself. He took the man aside.

"Is something wrong, Joln?" he said.

The man took off his hat and turned it in his hands, revealing his thinning hair. "It's probably nothing sir, but last night after my watch--" he said, and he swallowed, began again. "Last night after my watch I had a lot of dreams that I can't remember. But the thing is, I know what they were about."

"What were they about?" Kade stared at the man seriously.

Joln swallowed. "They were about Ellin, sir," he said, his voice wavering. "I should have

married her, fifteen years ago. But I couldn't. I—I left her." The man sniffed, hung his head. So he had dreamed of someone he had lost, just as Kade had. But had he seen her?

Kade put his hand on Joln's shoulder. "Did anything else happen?" he said.

Joln swallowed. "I'm sorry sir—I guess I dozed off on my watch. I must have, because I couldn't move, and—I saw her step into camp and look at me as if she wanted me to go to her." So he had the same dream as Kade. Or had something actually walked into their camp? Kade shook his head at the thought. Of course it was a dream. Wasn't it?

"I'm sorry, sir," said Joln. Apparently the man thought Kade had shaken his head at him. "I know it must seem crazy. And you all were depending on me to keep a good watch, and I dozed off."

"No, it's all right," said Kade. He knew he would feel guilty for condemning the man for something that he himself had done. But it would do no good to feed the man's fear. "The cold's getting to you, and the thought of traveling over this wasteland delta is probably getting to you too. That's what's making you dream these things, Joln. Just don't worry about this place, don't believe any of those stories, and you'll have nothing to worry about; in a few days we'll be gone." He glanced back at the wagons; the rest of the men were almost ready. "Now come on, it's time to move out."

Joln looked at him uncertainly. "Kade, this place… it's not just the cold and the stories; this place itself is getting to me. I can almost feel it, like it's closing in around me or something."

"No," said Kade. "Not this place. It's the cold, and the wind, and the isolation, and the stories. Come on, let's go."

They joined the others and the caravan set out across the ice again, the snow now past their ankles, making their way harder than the day before. After they had traveled for some time Kade noticed that Mard was behaving strangely, not meeting his eyes.

"Is something wrong, Mard?" he said.

The man looked at him, and sighed. "I'm sorry, Kade," he said. "But last night I did something I haven't done in years; I fell asleep on my watch, even if it was only for a few minutes. And—" The man ended abruptly and did not continue.

"What, Mard?" said Kade, but he was sure he already knew the answer.

"It's nothing, Kade," he said, his voice hard.

"Tell me."

"I dreamed my mother stepped into the clearing with me."

His mother… "I thought you never knew your mother, Mard," said Kade. "I thought you were raised in an orphanage."

"I was." The man did not continue, and Kade had to press him.

"How do you know it was your mother, Mard?"

"I don't know, Kade," he said. "I just knew, all right?" Kade left him alone.

All three of them had dreamed the same dream. But had it been a dream? What else could it have been? Some ghost of their past walking into the clearing with them? Some shape-shifting phantom? No, of course not. But if it was not, it meant the land or something in the land was causing them to dream the same dream. Or maybe it really was the cold and the isolation and the stories, getting to all three of them. But Kade would not turn back; Father hadn't worked so hard over the last months of his life so they could turn back so easily, when there was no obvious danger—and it would take a lot of danger for him to turn back. He would get the shipment to Grenasti.

As they moved north, the land began to change. It grew more rugged, the paths through the rocky islands twisting and winding. The snow had stopped sometime during the night when Kade was asleep, but in the middle of the afternoon it began again. The wind from the north lifted their cloaks and pushed the snow into drifts, and the horses struggled through. By the time they stopped for the night, they had only gone perhaps twelve miles after fourteen hours of travel.

They made camp for the night and lay down in their pallets, and Kade wondered what the night would bring. When he finally slept, he dreamed restless dreams of his father's death, again and again, his dreams blurring into one long dream.

* * *

Kade was shaken awake, and he saw Evid standing over him. It was time for his watch. Kade sat up, blinked the sleep from his eyes, and looked at Evid as the man went to his pallet but did not lie down. He sat there staring distantly into the trees for some time.

"What is it, Evid?" he said.

"I don't know, Kade. I didn't know I could dream with my eyes open, but I did. Or maybe I didn't—maybe I did close them and didn't know it. I'm sorry." So the dream had come to him as well—if it was a dream.

"What did you dream?"

The man sighed. "I'm sorry, Kade. I can't tell you now. Maybe tomorrow." The man lay down, and Kade did not press him further.

The wind and the snow still continued around him, even this late in the night; there was at least half a foot of the cold whiteness now. Kade wrapped his cloak around him, moved close to the fire as the darkness pressed in. He was sure he felt eyes on him, but when he glanced around he saw nothing but the trees and the snow.

"No." The voice was Ruuk's, and Kade turned his head to look at him. "No." The man was asleep, having some dream. "No Dek, don't." Ruuk's breathing quickened, and he began shifting in his sleep. "No. No! Don't do it you fool!" Kade shook him and the man's eyes opened. They shifted around the camp and settled on Kade with a scowl. But there was bleakness in his eyes.

"Damn it," he said breathily. "It's this place. It's this damn place. If we had never come here, I wouldn't have dreamed. I wouldn't have remembered. But we *did* come here and I *did* dream and I *did* remember." The man turned away from Kade and pulled his blankets over his head.

"What did you dream?" said Kade. He could guess what it was, but he was curious as to who the man had seen.

"Leave me alone," said Ruuk. "Just leave me alone." Kade left him alone; he didn't need the man's explanation.

All five of them, the same dream. What did it mean? What would happen next? More dreams? Nothing? He hoped so. He sat his watch, and the snow continued to fall. The night went on, and still it continued. Then he saw the faint glow and knew that it had come again, whatever it was.

It stepped through the trees to him, and then it stood there staring at him, his father's pleading form. *Come to me, my son. I have missed you so much these past months.* And Kade had missed him too, missed him very much. He wanted desperately to go to him, to embrace him, but he knew he could not.

"Leave me," he said. The figure was gone—not vanished, but simply gone. It had never been there, where scattered snowflakes fell to the ground in the dimmest light before dawn. Kade hung his head. Damn this place. Damn this place and the dream. *But I won't give up, Father. I'll make it through to Grenasti.*

When the sun crept over the trees in the east, the snow had stopped and blue sky showed between the clouds above him. He woke the men and they packed their things and moved north again. They were a somber group, all of them silent as they moved, remembering their dreams. Kade was the only one who knew they had all had the same dream. He would keep that to himself as long as he could; it would do no good to breed more fear. If the men grew more fearful, they might turn around and head south out of the delta. No, he would not tell them.

The snow began just after noon. It came down lightly, but did not subside. And the land became more rugged, twisting and turning. Islands sprung up that they could not get the wagons over, and they were forced to go around them, sometimes heading miles out of their way. The horses plodded on, the sweat freezing on their hides even beneath the mantles that the men had thrown over them to keep them warm. When night drew near and it was time for them to stop Kade didn't know how far they had gone northward, but he knew it was less than they had gone the day before. He would not take a watch tonight, and he lay down wondering what would happen to the other men.

* * *

"Kade." He came out of a painful dream of his father's death. Once again, it blurred with the others into one long dream. Damn this place.

He sat up, blinked at the surprising brightness, rubbed his eyes. Mard was shaking the other men awake. Joln was nowhere in sight, and he had the last watch. Kade looked at the sun and saw that it had been up for at least an hour.

"Where is Joln?" he said, standing.

"I have no idea, Kade," replied Mard. "I just woke up a minute ago, and he was gone."

"What?" said Ruuk. "Gone?"

"We should look for him," said Evid.

"Of course we should," said Kade. He stood, looked around. There were no tracks; the fresh snow had covered everything, and now it was well past their ankles. "Everyone choose a direction and go," he said, and he strode off, calling for Joln. The other men did the same.

He searched through the wooded island, plodding through the snowy underbrush, but he did not find Joln. The calls of the other men grew more distant.

Suddenly he heard Evid cry out louder than the others. "Here he is! Oh god, he's dead!"

Kade ran as best he could in the snow, and he reached Evid just as Mard and Ruuk did. He stood over a snowy hump like a log, but when Kade looked closer he saw that it was Joln's body, frozen blue and covered with frost. The four men brushed the snow off him and turned him over. There were no cuts or bruises on his body; he had frozen to death. But his face held an expression of calm, and it almost seemed that he had been crying.

"What was he doing away from camp?" said Evid, as he stared wide-eyed at Kade.

"Why would he leave?" said Ruuk, also staring at him with that squint of his. Mard said nothing but stared at Kade as well. Why did they expect an answer out of him? Perhaps they were remembering their dreams, the way the figure seemed to call to them.

"I don't know," said Kade. "How could I know?" Dead. The man was really dead. Father

had never lost a man. Never.

"I can't believe this," said Evid, shaking his head and turning back to Joln's body. "I've known him since…I don't remember when I met him. We both worked for your father for so long."

"Help me carry him," Kade growled as he stooped. The three men glanced at each other uncertainly, then stooped as well and helped him carry Joln's body back to the camp. They laid him in a wagon and covered him with a blanket.

"Let's move out," said Kade. "Mard, you drive Joln's wagon." The men looked at him, astonished.

"What?" said Mard.

"I'm not going any further, after this," said Ruuk, swinging his head toward Joln's body. "We should never have come here in the first place, Kade! We should go back now!"

"No!" It was almost a shout. They all looked at Kade in surprise. "We are going to get this shipment to Grenasti! Joln died because he didn't think! He left the camp for whatever reason, to gather more firewood maybe, and then he got lost and couldn't find his way back! And he was on watch duty! He should never have left the camp for any reason without waking us first!"

The three men stared at him, their mouths open. At last Mard spoke gently. "Kade, the man's *dead*. It could happen to any of us out here in this frozen wilderness. We really should go back, lad, and bring a new shipment later, through Whitebridge."

Kade's eyes blazed. Mard knew the folly of what he had just said! "If we wait until later there might not *be* another shipment! If we do that, then this shipment will be worthless because there won't be any market for it, and it will be as good as lost. My father worked too hard to get us this far with what we have, and I'm not going to let it fall apart! If any of you still wish to be employed by me then you will follow me across the delta to Grenasti!" Kade swung his glare around at the men, but none of them met his eyes. "Well men, are we agreed?" They all nodded reluctantly. "Then let's pack up and go."

No one spoke for a long time that morning as they headed northward—more or less northward, weaving around the islands. The snow began before noon, a steady shower that lasted right up into the night, but it didn't surprise Kade; the snow in this place always seemed to last through the night and stop just before morning. That was the way of this place, and he could deal with it. The rest would deal with it, too. *I'm sorry for losing Joln, Father*, he thought. *But I will get this shipment to Grenasti.*

"Nobody leaves the camp for any reason without waking me first," he told the men when they made their camp for the night. They nodded and lay down to sleep, and Kade sat up on watch.

The snow fell heavier, and the wind sighed loudly in the trees. The darkness grew around him and the cold deepened, and Kade wrapped his cloak about him and huddled close to the fire. The glow began to come through the trees, and the figure that was his father appeared soon after, wearing his usual brown shirt and gray breeches, and his old hat that he would never throw away and replace.

Father stared at him, pleading. *Come to me, my son. Please, come to me. I have missed you so much, in the long, cold, loneliness of death.*

Kade squeezed his eyes shut, and a tear escaped them and fell to the snow. *No Father, I cannot go to you.* He looked at the figure that was his father again. His heart nearly broke, seeing father standing there in so much pain and sorrow. *My son, why do you hate me? Please, I*

need you to love me, to come to me and embrace me.

Kade choked. *No, I cannot. You are not really my father…*

Please son, please.

No. No, you are not my father.

Please.

No! Leave me!

The figure was gone, again as if it had never been. Kade stood alone—*stood*. He was in the woods, away from the camp. He looked frantically around him, and he saw the firelight flickering through the trees some distance off. His heart raced as he sloshed through the shin-deep snow back to the camp. If he had not resisted, he could have ended up like Joln. The thing had drawn him away—or was it a thing? Was it just some dream that this place used to torment its victims before it killed them? *Oh Father, we will make it through this delta. And we will get the shipment to Grenasti. I promise you that.*

He woke Evid when it was time for his watch, and Kade went to his pallet. He did not lie down immediately, but instead turned to Evid. "Do not leave the camp for any reason," he said. Evid nodded. "No matter what you see." Evid looked at him, nodding slowly. "Wake me if you see *any*thing." Evid nodded again. Kade took one last look at the man and lay down. *Please be alive when I wake, Evid. Father never lost a man, and I have already lost one.*

* * *

"Kade." He woke from a dream of his father's death. Again, he did not remember it; all his dreams were one long dream.

"Kade." He sat up, blinked the sleep from his eyes. It was still dark, and Mard and Ruuk were awake, staring at him. He did not see Evid.

"Is he gone?" he said.

Mard nodded. "An old traveler like me has an internal clock, luckily enough. I knew it was time for my watch."

Kade nodded. "We should look for him."

"It took him—I know it did," said Ruuk. Kade and Mard looked at him.

"Is it real," said Kade, "or is it a dream? I think it's only a dream."

"You had the same dream?" said Mard. Kade nodded reluctantly. "And you didn't tell me, didn't tell any of us." Kade did not reply.

Ruuk scowled at him. "Is this what you wanted to happen, Kade?" he said. "Because it might not have happened if you had told us!"

"Shut up and let's go look for Evid," Kade growled, and strode off calling Evid's name. Mard and Ruuk did the same.

They found him just as they had found Joln, but it took them longer this time, in the dark. The man was half covered with snow, and frozen to death. Again, he had that look of calm, and it was as if he had been crying.

They carried him back to the camp and laid him beside Joln.

"I can drive his wagon," said Kade. "Mard, you were next on watch."

Ruuk exploded. "You still want to go north, don't you Kade? Well I'm not going any further! I can't go on like this, not after I saw…" he trailed off. The man's eyes glistened, and Kade was struck; Ruuk was never a man for tears. Never.

"Who did you see, Ruuk?" he asked.

"Nobody."

"Come on, Ruuk, who did you see?"

"I saw Dek, all right? I saw my childhood friend, murdered when he was only twelve years old! It was just him and me, doing everything together! I've never had a real friend since! He was the only one!" Ruuk wiped the tears from his eyes viciously. "Are you still going north, Kade?"

Kade stared at him levelly for a moment. "Yes, I am. I will not turn back now. I will not waste Father's last work. And we don't even know how close we are to the other side of the delta; we could easily be closer to the northern side than we are to the southern side—we have gone at least thirty miles north, and the end can't be much further away. Are you coming with me or not? If not, then do not expect to work for me again."

Ruuk gathered himself. "After making that decision, Kade, I would never work for you again anyway. I know I'm going to die out here, and for a minute, when I saw my friend Dek begging me to come to him, I didn't care." The man turned from him and went to his wagon. He took his things and started away from them.

"Goodbye, Kade," he called over his shoulder. "Mard, if you're not a fool then you'll come with me."

"You're going *now*, at night?" said Mard. Ruuk didn't reply or even turn. He strode away silently into the snow, fading slowly into the dark.

"Are you still with me, Mard?" said Kade.

"You're set on going north?"

"I am."

Mard sighed. "I'll go with you, but only because I think you're right about being closer to the northern edge of the delta. It can't be more than fifty miles across, from what I've heard of it."

Kade nodded. "Should one of us sit on watch? It could take one of us…"

"Of course we need a watch," said Mard, "with all the wolves around here. And I wouldn't want that thing to come to me in my sleep—if it is a thing, and not a dream." He looked at Kade. "It would have been my watch anyway, so I'll finish up this one." Kade nodded, and went to his pallet. Once again, he dreamed restless dreams of his father's death.

* * *

Kade awoke the next morning with Mard shaking him.

"Did it come for you?" he said.

"No, it did not," Mard replied. "There might be a reason for that."

Kade thought for a moment. "Ruuk?" Mard nodded.

They moved northward again, each driving a wagon, leaving one behind. As they went, the snow began in the middle of the morning, and it didn't stop. Just before noon, they saw a shape lying on the ice in the snow ahead of them. It was Ruuk. Now Kade had lost three of the men who had worked for his father. His failure was nearly complete. But if he could just get the shipment to Grenasti, his father's last work would not be wasted.

The snow continued on into the night, and they stopped to make their camp. Mard decided to take the first watch. "Why not?" he said. "If I'm going to die anyway I might as well die first." Kade agreed with a sigh and went to sleep.

And he dreamed a dream. In his dream he lay by the fire, and Mard sat staring into

the trees. Mard hung his head, and a tear fell from his eyes into the snow. He shook his head violently. "No, no, you're not my mother," he said.

Then he raised his head and looked into the trees again, where Kade could not see. Mard rose slowly and moved toward the trees, and Kade wanted to cry out, to tell him to stop, but he could not; that was the way of dreams. He reached the edge of the trees and disappeared.

* * *

Mard was gone when he woke. It was well after dawn, and the sky was still overcast and the snow still fell. Kade remembered his dream, and he leapt to his feet.

"Mard!" he yelled. There was no answer. He called again and again, and still there was no answer. He looked for tracks, but of course there were none. The snow had covered them, and now it was almost up to his knees.

He looked for Mard for almost an hour before he found his frozen, lifeless body, and he carried him to the wagon and laid him beside the others. He moved north then, as fast as he could, but he knew he could not reach the edge of the delta by nightfall. As he went, the snow fell heavier around him, and the cold deepened and the wind picked up. As night was falling, he still saw no end to the delta—which didn't surprise him since he couldn't see more than fifty yards ahead of him anyway. He didn't even know if he was still going north.

He made a fire on one of the islands, and sat with his back to a log, staring at the flames. The snow was piled high around him, and as it melted it flowed into his fire pit. He stood and scooped away the snow around the fire so it wouldn't go out.

When he had finished, he sat there for a long time, waiting; he knew it would come, and finally it did. The glow appeared in the forest ahead of him, and he hung his head and did not look at it. He saw the glow reflected off the snow, and it intensified and then stopped, and he knew the figure had come to a halt. Kade said nothing, and the figure did nothing.

"Have you come for me?" said Kade at last. He had spoken; it was not a dream. Was it?

"I have." Kade's heart nearly broke; it was his father's voice. He suppressed the emotion welling up within him, and he drew his nail across his forearm, and he felt a sharp pain and saw blood; it was not a dream.

He slowly lifted his eyes and looked on the form of his father, standing there silently before him.

"You want to believe," Father said. "Why do you not let yourself?"

"You—you are not my father," he said, but it was half-hearted.

"You do not know what I am."

"I know what you are not."

"Do you? Men are what they are because they make other people believe they are what they want to be. If I can make you believe, I will be your father. Your men wanted so much to believe that I was their loved one, come back to them after so many years. Out here in this wilderness the desire secretly rose within them to be with the ones they loved—so secretly, in fact, that they did not know they desired it. It grew in them, and in the end they all believed." Father's face took on the purest compassion, and Kade wiped a tear from his eye.

"And the desire has been growing within you too—the need to be with your father. You led them here, to my delta, and one by one they died because you did not listen to them. You insisted on traveling through my realm when they warned you not to. I will not let you leave—you are already in my power, and you have been since you entered the delta. Look around you;

where is your fire and your wagon?" Kade looked, and they were nowhere to be seen. He stood in the middle of the wood, and the night was dark around him except where the figure of his father walked.

"If I do not kill you now, then you will die slowly in this frozen wilderness. So why not die quickly, knowing that it was with your father?" Father moved toward him slowly, his arms outstretched to embrace him. Kade needed him most now, after all that had happened. His death had come so swiftly, and when he was gone Kade could barely stand on his own. He stared at his father as he moved closer.

"My son," he said.

"Oh, Father," Kade sobbed, and he reached out to embrace him.

When he died, it was in his father's warm embrace.

The End

Jonathan Ruland is currently a general studies major at a Michigan Community College, with plans to transfer soon to a four-year university. He has been an avid reader of high fantasy all his life and loves the journey into another world and the enchantment that high fantasy provides.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 15

He drew himself back from the arched window and leaned against the cool stone inside the tower fort. He was at least comfortable in his usual surroundings, but that would not save Mesathine from the mukantas of the forest, or the occasional marauders who saw the twin cities as a nice challenge to their usual routines.

On that thought he reached for his firearm. He had no idea what he would do with it, but he needed to feel safe. Safety was imperative.

The weapon was cold. He had only used it once, and it was a very long time ago in practice courses. He felt around the lengthy sniper barrel and down the excessively thin stock, touching his fingertips on every inset and hole he could find. The weapon was so light he had to be sure in his own mind that he was actually holding it.

It was a special issue lightweight Dirindyr Calyr. The Dirindyr was a common firearm of the Wars for most every city, had been that way for as long as Kil could remember. Even still, few soldiers of Mesathine carried them; most opted for crystalline staves, portables, or other weaponry crafted from the heat sensitive crystals of the Eetger Mountains on the west end. Crystalline weapons – Kil had never developed a feel for them. They were effective, no doubt, but there was something about firing a massive bolt at an enemy that couldn't suit him. He would much rather fire a single, silent shot, while remaining concealed and unknown.

That was his life. Concealment. He was a watcher, meant to keep study from on high. The solidarity would most always lead to deliberation: of himself, his insides, and what drove him. He knew the answer to those looming questions.

The pride he felt from his profession kept him going. He thrived on it. The fact that he was helping to save people from harm was his motivation. He knew he was upholding a long-standing tradition: one that his ancestors began when Mesathine was but a simple miner's outpost, one that his people refused to abandon. He even craved the isolation that came with his work. It was a necessity now. He needed this loneliness like he needed air to breathe.

He had been alone in the watchtower all day, and he was more thankful for it today than usual, for his vision problems could not be shared. If anyone were to discover his disability he could lose his job. He could not let that happen.

He just hoped the opacity would clear by nightfall. He couldn't begin to imagine the consequences…*all would be lost.*

* * *

Night came as swiftly as winter slicing through summer days. It was a cool calm, different from the warmth of the day that had drifted but a few hours ago.

There were few sounds to guide the ears, nothing more than the occasional chirp and whistle of the racmin that scurried throughout the city streets. Kil listened closely for any sign of mukanta. Their squeals would give them away. Sound was all he had, for his eyesight was so blurred that he could only barely make out the outline of his own hand before him.

Without looking he knew his hands were calloused, just as he would be someday if he could not regain his sight. The watch was everything. He couldn't let it slip away from him.

He had to keep that from his mind.

He wrestled himself from his floor seat and felt his way up the smooth metal walls and along the jagged stone insets. This building had been upgraded before Kil had become a watcher, along with most of the other important structures. Since the discovery of thine ore, none of the newer city sectors were built of stone, and the older areas where Kil spent most of his

time had been plated with the highly versatile metal. The metal gave the city a majestic feel Kil loved. It even formed over the stone engravings of ancient Mesathine, so the past was not lost in embracing the future.

The clvir windows inside the insets were cold from the night air. The clvir was thin and clear, yet strong enough to keep the occupants of the room safe from most outside dangers. There were six windows in the tower, one for each wall. It should have been a view to die for.

It was time to call someone else in. He wouldn't do anyone any good this way, and it would be disaster if anything were to happen on his watch. He would use a generic excuse, something believable yet vague in details. He doubted any of his commanders would believe the truth anyway, not when it showed flaws in Defense Committee orders.

He walked as quickly as he could, fearing the depth of night and the mukanta attacks that had become far too frequent as of late.

His weapon fell from his hand, clattering on the smooth polished floor as it came to a rest at his foot. He stumbled a bit as he bent down to pick it up. While he leaned close to the window his ears caught a sound, distinct in some obscure way, a screech bellowing through the night and finally striking him with ultimate precision.

Mukantas.

Then came a loud crash. An invasion was underway. The mukantas had sent a raiding party, or perhaps it was a full-scale battle. Kil was unsure. One thing was certain. This would not end well.

It was over for Kil Elon.

* * *

Roj gritted his teeth in a long, tedious expression as he watched Kil Elon make his way from the lift. Elon walked slowly, taking steps no larger than those of a child. He took his time while the commotion of battle filled the air around him. He was unaffected by it, and that infuriated Roj further.

Elon was of fair height, though not as tall as Roj, with the white watcher uniform in perfect order, as any soldier would be expected to maintain. He had shoulder length brown hair and eyes to match. The slightest beginnings of a beard covered his slim jaw and grew up to meet his hair with matching color. His eyes were directed on the ground, intent on only the path before him.

When Elon finally came within range Roj spoke up, impatient from the needless wait. "What were you doing? Sleeping? Why didn't you sound the warning?"

Elon did not appear to have an answer for any of the questions. Instead, he stumbled part of a word or two and then gave up.

"See what you caused?" Roj gestured abroad. A good distance away a cluster of older stone buildings near the eastern gate were heavily damaged, with pieces of the walls constantly crackling and falling violently to the ground. Near the buildings a large gathering of soldiers formed a double blockade, holding strong against a full arsenal of lanky, pale skinned mukantas.

The commander watched Elon's expression as he gazed toward the chaotic scene. Elon's eyes were unfocused, hollowed, as if he was not registering the images or did not care. Roj chose to believe the latter.

A large jolt of energy came from the direction the two men were looking. It flew haphazardly around the mukantas, as if deciding the victim, and settled in on the first. A

horrendous squeal came as the blue energy ball landed directly in the chest of the beast, thrusting it back, bodily fluid sloshing.

"Attack!" a young squad general yelled as he led another handful of soldiers toward the fight.

"Hold the line men!" Roj shouted, attempting to add motivation to the fighters.

Two more luminous blasts came from the crystalline portables the newest batch of soldiers had set up. The blasts disengaged two mukantas who had nearly pierced a front line soldier. The soldier fell to the ground and quickly scurried to his feet, moving back behind the blockade to let others fall victim.

Roj gave Elon a crooked stare. "Are you gathering this?"

"It is my fault," Elon replied.

"It is, and you will pay for it. You will!" Roj clenched his fist, but Elon did not give it any attention.

Roj turned back to the battle just as another five mukantas leaped into the fight. Their gangly legs and arms flapped about without direction as they flew in the air, overcoming the gate with ease.

A couple of the beasts landed against the sides of the buildings. Their hands and feet created a suction that allowed them to propel back into the air even higher. As the mukantas leapt off, weaker pieces of the stone broke, falling to the ground and trapping two Mesathine soldiers.

"This is the last of them! Take them out!" Roj shouted as he rushed away from Elon to help the trapped soldiers.

As Roj ran to the soldier's aid, three frontline soldiers aimed their firearms at the incoming mukantas and fired. The energy blasts swiftly found their targets in midair and knocked them to the ground where they remained unmoving.

The mukantas landed just shy of Roj who began to move debris to free the trapped soldiers. Roj struggled with the bigger pieces of stone, using all his strength to remove the broken shards. After some time he managed to move enough stone to pull the bewildered men free. He helped them to their feet and to the safety of a side street away of the main battle, calling field medics to treat them.

Elon tried to speak as Roj approached him once again, "Roj, I should have seen them. I'm–"

Roj held up his hand, stopping him mid-sentence. "Don't even bother."

The last of the mukantas were beginning to flee, except a brave three who seemed determined to crush whatever they could before they were brought down.

Elon clasped his firearm and aimed it at the creatures while Roj looked on. Elon's arms shook and he struggled to keep the weapon steady. After but a moment of waiting, Roj pulled his own handheld from its leg brace and fired at the mukantas, leaving all three motionless on the ground.

"You think that bit of caring will help you?"

Elon looked out at the waning battleground without answering. To Roj, it looked as though Elon was beginning to understand the seriousness of the situation – the fallen soldiers and the ravaged buildings that would cost over a cale of mesi to repair. Was Kil Elon finally feeling sorry for his mistake…or was he feeling sorry for being caught? Roj knew the answer to that question.

"You're dismissed soldier. We don't need you here," Roj said in a slow rasp. "Before you

go, answer me. Why didn't you sound the warning?"

Elon looked desperate. "I would have sir, but I could not see them. My eyes…something's wrong. I wasn't going to tell anyone, but you should know the truth."

Roj squinted at Elon. His bottom jaw hung, twisted slightly. The wind grazed his graying short strands of hair, while causing the straps on his fading black coat to flap idly. "The committee will hear about this."

* * *

The air was thick inside the cramped, musty room. Dust stuck to Kil's insides, making it hard to exhale. Saliva wet his throat, mixing with the dust to create a thick syrup. He swallowed, grimacing as it went down.

It had been ages since his quarters had been cleaned. His room did not have soluble surfaces, and he hadn't cared to buy mechanized scavengers to scour the floors and dissolve the trash and dirt particles. He certainly didn't have the time or energy to clean it, so it remained just the same, except for the gradually thickening dust film.

That was the way of Elsrin Sector: cheap, sparse, and suitable only to the loners and less fortunate. It was an environment Kil had grown accustomed to over the years. He didn't need much anyway. Luxurious carmre homes with polished mesan floors were for the indulgent. The single room had the necessities he needed, and best of all he had privacy to continue his work. His work occupied most of his time, even when he was supposed to be relaxing in preparation for the next day. He researched daily defense reports and kept watch from his window. He never stopped watching – until now.

He could hear the rustle on the streets below. Things were lively today. He heard footsteps pitter-pattering on the stone – people hurrying to jobs, to families, oblivious to the underlying mischief and corruption that indirectly affected their life each and every day.

The roar of a passing public transport broke Kil's concentration. He felt tremors as it flew overhead, undoubtedly carrying another load of tourists to Daara Sector. The fuel stench grew heavier as the vessel passed.

Kil truthfully did not know why anyone would want to tour Mesathine. Mesathine was an industrial city, littered with machine shops, metal crafters, and miners. The attractive area for tourists must have been the Eetger Mountains, but the city committees, who restricted access to all but the highest bidding mining corporations, had already claimed much of that.

Kil sighed. He was losing pride in his home, something he thought would never happen. He was beginning to see the manipulation more clearly now. He just hoped he could hang on to what he had left and use it to fuel his rehabilitation…if he had one.

He focused his hearing a little deeper. A clang became apparent, and then a grind. Kil knew very well what that meant. He'd heard these sounds so often that it had become regular background noise. Construction units had already begun repairing the buildings and streets in Daara. Kil could imagine the web of poles reaching into the sky. In his mind he could see the metal cables dangling from the outstretched arms, lifting hundreds of thine panels and bolting them into place all at once.

It was routine in Mesathine. Mukantas attacked so frequently that many people had become oblivious to the violence, some even daring to stroll the streets during an attack. The protesters were also growing in numbers, demanding more of the Defense Committee, questioning why more had not been done to prevent attacks. At least half the population sided

with protestor ideals, and this put the committee on edge. Every new attack left at least one watcher without a job. There were no mistakes.

Kil knew there would be no leniency for him.

He was running out of time. The Defense Committee wanted to speak with him immediately. He'd successfully locked his clvir-mounted intraceel from accepting incoming transmissions, but it would only be a matter of time before the committee tapped in. Until they forced their transmission through, he could only steady his trembling being and wait. If his vision did not clear soon he would have no hope of remaining a watcher.

He stood up straight, taking his weight off the aged wall paneling. It moaned as he did, showing little fortitude as always. He felt his way along the panels to his usual chair, all the while trying to avoid jagged bolts protruding from the wall facing. As he sat he realized his fingers were covered in a film, reminding him once again how long it had been since the room had been cleaned.

The stiff double seat was no more comfortable than the wall, for the two were made from the same inexpensive material, whatever it was. As Kil adjusted in the seat, he heard a flicker.

It was time.

Kil heard a smooth male voice carry throughout the room. "We've been expecting you," the voice said, as if Kil had come to him.

Kil recognized the voice. It was Dail Reos, Prime Defense Commissioner. Reos was as arrogant as he was greedy, and he had the intelligence to back it up.

Kil stared ahead. "I've been a little busy planning my future."

"As well you should be."

There was silence for but a moment.

Finally another spoke, a woman Kil thought he had heard before, "Elon, we understand you are having vision problems. Please explain."

"That is true," Kil said. "My eyes are murky and I see nothing more than unfocused shades of color."

"Why did you not report this?" a third voice inquired.

"I was about to call someone when the attack occurred." Kil did not divulge more than necessary.

"Pity you couldn't get to the intraceel sooner." That was Roj. He must have lingered after reporting in.

Kil wondered how many more were listening. Typically there were at least ten commissioners at the meetings, usually more.

"How long have you had these vision problems?" the woman asked in a soothing tone, so very reminiscent of someone he knew from somewhere, sometime.

"It started today, not long before the attack," he lied.

Reos spoke again, "I see. You conveniently didn't have time to reach the intraceel to call a replacement, and now you want what?" Reos paused. "What is it you want from this fabrication? Is it a shift of blame? Mesi? Or perhaps you want to keep your job since none of this was your fault? Which is it?"

Kil let the words sink in, every bit of sarcasm, and every word laced with contempt. "I want nothing more than to see liars like you removed from command," he finally offered, while calmly running his fingers through his bronze-hued hair, washing it back behind his ears.

Kil could feel the anger radiating through the screen like sheer heat, making his skin tingle.

"Don't dare test me. You're treading down the wrong path as it is. You've already lost your job, but there is still much more that I can take. You would not–"

"It was you who caused this, Reos. It was every one of you on this committee, and everyone on the Medical Committee who recommended the experiment."

The woman gracefully interrupted Reos before he could speak again, obviously trying to keep the conversation on a more productive tangent. "I'm very sorry for your medical problems, and I'm sure this committee feels the same, but the operation was necessary."

Kil wasted no time replying. It was time to say what should have been said ages ago. "No, that's where you're wrong–" He hesitated, realizing he did not know her name.

"Mirl. Seela Mirl," she offered.

"Tell me, Mirl, why was this operation necessary when the onem scopes were working perfectly for so long?"

"I cannot answer that. It is not my area of expertise."

There was a sigh. "Your argument holds no relevance. The onem scopes were outdated. Without the best eyesight, watchers are no good, even with extra equipment. If you are having problems with the operation, it is not our problem, you should be complaining to the Medical Committee. *This* committee grows impatient with your obvious excuses," Reos said in a deep growl.

"It is relevant. Your committee ordered the procedure. We were forced to undergo the operation, and now you are taking my job because it caused me medical problems."

"That is where you are wrong, Elon. We are taking your job because, despite your denial, you caused Daara Sector serious damages. People were injured because of your incompetence."

There was silence after Reos' words. Kil had no energy in him to reply.

Reos spoke once again, in a resounding, confident tone. "You are no longer of use to the city of Mesathine. You will be replaced by someone more able to do the job."

With that, the communication link severed, leaving Kil alone once again with nothing but the sound of city movement.

* * *

The yri dangled from the low hanging pipes draped just above the entranceway. Their shifty, soupy frames drew toward the floor, held by one or sometimes two suction cups attached to what appeared to be the ends of their bodies. One could never tell with those pests, their shapes morphed so often. They were unpredictable and far too rampant inside the larger industrial buildings.

Seela Mirl watched the tiny things go about their repetition of slinking along the pipes and wondered why nothing had been done to eradicate them. They were quite annoying, with the odd blue film they left behind wherever they slid, and the screeching. The yri screeched any time they sensed movement too close to them, and they had picked a busy place to occupy, just as a pest would be expected to do.

They had screeched when Seela and Elon entered the hanger. It had startled Elon, though he tried not to show it.

Elon sat across from Seela. His long fingers cupped his jaw as he stared straight through her. He was thinking, in a way that made Seela wonder what was on his mind. His hair covered half of his face, leaving only one diligent eye open for Seela to see. His strong upper body slouched in the wooden chair while his red overcoat hung at his sides, fastened tightly, giving an

aura of discomfort.

Seela did not know what to say, not yet. She'd told Elon that this meeting was important, and it was. It was important enough to personally lead him to this familiar hangar for seclusion.

They hadn't spoken much during the ride over; instead they listened to the churn of the public transport engine while it flew them to Ecaura Sector. Elon had not questioned her during the ride. He had followed her lead, unknowing of the destination or the purpose.

Now, though, Seela needed to initiate conversation, explain her reasoning, but she didn't know where to start.

Her eyes wandered while she thought. She drew her sight away from the yri and abroad to the interior of the large hanger. It was an unorganized, dirty place, with pieces of ships and old tools thrown about. Seela was accustomed to it though; she had a love for it. Most of her childhood had been spent in this very hangar in the industrial sector.

A clutter of privately owned cargo ships formed a line in the center, the kind that had huge swinging doors on the back ends for hauling cargo, and only one cube on front for a pilot to sit. Five repairmen were gathered around the ships, investigating the work that needed to be done. The repairmen, most of them friends of Seela, shimmied over and under extruding fuel lines, twisting levers on tools attached to the outer hulls. They looked content, even as new vessels flew in through the retracted roof and landed in line for repairs. The cycle was constant.

It was quite loud when new vessels came in. Most engines roared with the sound of metal scrubbing on metal. Some squealed a high-pitched cry – that was always a bad sign.

Elon appeared to notice the noise more than anyone. Each time a ship came in, or a yri screeched, Seela noticed his face tighten and his teeth clench. It was obvious that he had spent little time in places such as this. No, his military training was for sole observation, something of a rarity in the rush of maintenance, as odd as that seemed.

Aside from the commotion of the center, there was only sparse space with less than adequate seating. Seela and Elon occupied two of the four chairs at the only table that wasn't bogged down in tarnished spare parts. Near them, a vintage model intraceel – one made before the shift to clvir units – silently displayed prerecorded images of daily news accompanied by text. It was propped against a rusting blast cylinder, unnoticed to all but Seela.

Seela glanced across the table again. Elon sat still, and waited. He looked rattled, unnerved in some way, perhaps intimidated by the hustle of noise around him.

"Is there something else you needed to tell me, Mirl? We came a long way," he said. His fingers covered his mouth as he spoke, causing his lips to stick before returning to their correct position.

Seela picked nervously at her clothing. The finely threaded sleeves of her medical uniform were just too tempting. "Yes, there is," she began. "I think I may be able to help you."

"How? I've already lost my job," Elon replied.

"If you let me, I can make arrangements for another operation to repair the first. The committees will never have to know."

"Why should I trust you? Why would a committee member want to help an underling?"

Seela sighed uneasily. The eight chemical rings she wore on her left hand glistened green, showing her true thoughts. It was awkward to revisit old times. "Do you remember a young field medic from the training simulations?"

It looked as if a weight had been lifted from Elon's shoulders. He sat up, placing his hands on the table, allowing his crimson overcoat sleeves to dangle. "That was you," he said, confident in his tone.

"Yes, that was me who practiced on your scrapes and bruises." She chewed her bottom lip, nervous at the realization that he remembered her foolhardy youth. She waited for his response.

"You never told me your name," he said after a while. A hint of a grin played on his face.

Seela smiled without realizing it.

"So what have you done all this time? I haven't seen you since training," Elon said, clasping his hands.

"I did field work here in Mesathine until I was offered a superior position in Camis, working in-house. Reos recently offered me the advisory position on the Defense Committee, so I'm back for a while it seems."

Elon nodded. "So you're not on the Medical Committee?"

Seela lightly scratched rust from the table with her purple fingernails. "No, not technically. I relay information from the Medical Committee to the Defense Committee and offer my own insight."

"You could get me another operation?" Elon asked, his speckled bronze hair flapping in front of his face.

"Most definitely," she said, almost too quickly.

There was silence between them for a short while. A very large tourist ship flew into the hangar, in horrible disrepair. A short woman with long auburn hair slid a front hatch open and jumped out while gesturing to the repairmen. The repairmen approached, and Seela watched the woman hand them at least a dozen squares. Though the woman had tried to be discrete, Seela spotted the mesi easily from a distance. Such trades were not uncommon in this hangar. Pilots who knew the place well enough would often peddle a few extra squares for a jump in line and a quick repair.

Seela turned her gaze toward Elon once again, letting the underhanded act stay as far from her thoughts as possible. A sweet odor met her change of attention. It was odd – not the usual foul smog of Werrsun or Mesathine public craft – tantalizing and enveloping to the senses. She knew the source. It was what appeared to be a highly modified Sabora Niss class – a Vise craft. The vessel was a long polished black cylinder, with cabin room in the center and cone-shaped exhaust lines projecting from the back.

Seela knew why the Vise was in Mesathine. They were fortune hunting, as most of the Vise did. That was the Vise way – scouting for quick credits wherever they heard of a reward or bounty, trying to collect for being in the right place at the right time.

"Listen Elon, there is another reason we met here," she said, once again turning her attention.

'I knew there would be," he said.

Seela's eyes focused a bit. "I've done some research. The committee was wrong in punishing you. Pirr, the advisor before me, advised against the procedure, but the committee did not follow his advice."

"So they took his job too," Elon said, in quick tone.

"I'm beginning to form that opinion myself. The medical committee recommended the operation for all watchers, but I believe they knew there were prominent risks of eyesight loss, and even worse. The defense committee knew all of this as well, because of Pirr." Seela said, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. Her mouth suddenly became cottony. "I'm his replacement."

Elon squinted, his black eyelashes crisscrossing. "The Medical Committee must have worked out a deal for part of the mesi the Defense Committee saved by eliminating the onem

scopes."

The pilot of the Vise craft finally exited through the side hull. He had to duck under the top edge of the opening, as he was quite tall.

Seela merely glanced, not wanting to stare. "Neither committee will admit their wrongdoing. They know the public will pin this latest mukanta attack on them. You are their scapegoat."

"Well, they've got what they–"

"Wait. One moment." Seela interrupted, holding up her hand before realizing that Elon likely wouldn't see it. "Reos is on the intraceel."

On the tiny screen, Dail Reos stood broadcasting from the Defense Committee chambers. He was giving an update on the state of the city defense. The text along the top edge of the screen denoted his every word. It was all fairly trivial information – numbers of new recruits, future defense plans, and enlistment opportunities – until he got to the fatalities listing for the latest mukanta attack. Something startling ran the length of the screen. Seela thought she had misread it.

Kil Elon: missing in action…assumed dead…conspirator in recent attack.

"I think you may have stumbled into something much deeper than you expected, Elon," Seela said. Her face began to tighten. "That mukanta attack was more important than we realized."

"What's going on?" Elon asked. His hands began to tremble.

"Reos has announced that you're presumed dead. You know that means a reward for your capture. Worse, there is a Vise ship behind you."

Elon slid his chair slowly backward, preparing to stand. "That Vise must have seen the broadcast earlier. It must have been looped," he said, his voice trailing lower.

Seela stood at the same time Elon did. They both began a slow pace in the direction of the door, Seela holding Elon's hand. The Vise pilot was speaking to a repairman Seela knew fairly well, though not as long as many of the others. The Vise pilot was gesturing indiscreetly at his ship, but Seela knew he definitely hadn't come for repairs.

"Steady. Let's not draw attention to ourselves," Seela whispered.

The two walked a distance forward in a swift, yet normal pace. Seela suddenly made the mistake of looking back. Her eyes met those of the balding repairman. She looked deep into the pupils of her acquaintance – in their wild, selfish depths. At that moment, he pointed in her direction, and the Vise pilot turned.

Seela and Elon had almost reached the exit door – the only one in the building – when it slid shut. An old friend stood behind the accompanying window, frowning noticeably, while his older supervisor stood far behind. The Vise pilot and the balding repairman were approaching.

"Was that the door?" Elon asked. His shoulders tensed and his fingers twitched between Seela's.

"Yes," Seela said, taking in a breath of stuffy air. "You're going to have to go with them, Elon." Seela's voice struggled.

The air suddenly became thick with the stench of aging fuels as the pilot and repairman approached. It was enough to make Seela's eyes water.

"Don't do this, Lhr," she said, looking directly into the green eyes of the repairman. She thought she knew him, but evidently she did not.

Lhr shrugged. "You know I've got a family, Mirl. I think you would do the same in my position."

Seela gripped Elon's hand. "I'll help you," she said, facing him. "I promise I'll help you."

The Vise pilot's tight body suit stretched in uneven tone as he pulled Elon from Seela's hand. The pilot held tight on Elon's shoulder with one hand, while using his other hand to fasten a series of complex electronic devices to his new prisoner's forearms. The pilot grunted as he shoved Elon past Lhr.

"I want my cut of that reward," Lhr reminded the pilot, while flashing a smirk to Seela.

"He is innocent," she said. Her eyes squinted, showing all of her determination.

"Not my concern," Lhr said, turning to follow the pilot back to the cluster of ships.

The tools continued to pop, and the yri began to screech once again as they realized that their privacy had been invaded. All the while Seela watched the Vise herd Elon aboard the vessel.

* * *

"Unbelievable," Dail Reos said, tilting his head to take closer examination of the room. "Elon actually lives in this cave."

Roj turned, just finishing a bit of riffling on a corner shelf. "Horrible," he said.

Dail shuffled through the fabrics on bed to his left, only to reveal a hard metal underlay. He cocked his head, in wonder of how anyone could sleep in such stiff discomfort. There was nothing decorating the walls around the bed, no family albums or other memorabilia. There wasn't even a headset. The whole room was plain, certainly far too plain for a normal person.

Dail turned back to the three security guards just inside the doorway. "You're dismissed. Elon isn't here," he said, motioning to them.

The three guards nodded and started to file out.

"Mekos," Dail said, just as the last security guard reached the door.

The guard turned back, standing tall and ready. "Yes sir?"

"Assemble your squadrons and begin a city-wide perimeter search, starting with Ecaura Sector."

The guard raised an eyebrow, giving Dail a look of confusion. "Ecaura Sector? Are you sure, sir?" he asked.

"Those were my orders Mekos."

"As you wish, sir," Mekos said, closing eye contact and retreating through the door, ducking as he did.

Dail scratched his chin and looked around the room again. It was a pitiful place, so utterly lowly. The darkest, gloomiest of walls surrounded him, only partially held together by jagged fasteners that were too small. Some portions of the walls and ceiling were splitting, revealing the bare, single layer sheeting – the only outside protection. Dail could even see specs of light filtering through holes in the metal.

The thought of living in such a place disturbed him. Knowing that the outside was just before him, the elements close enough to feel from the inside walls gave Dail an indescribable nervousness, something that he had never felt in his own home. Dail let the nervousness reside. He knew that it would benefit him to keep a mental log of the atmosphere of this place, to simply remember what kind of person Kil Elon really was.

"Have a look at this," Roj said in his slow drawl, enunciating every word with precision.

Dail looked at Roj. The middle-aged soldier was tapping flat keys that were imprinted into the middle shelf in a row of three.

Roj studied the keys for a moment, then grazed his fingers over the surface and leaned in to investigate further. "An intraceel. Expensive one," he said.

"Yes. Especially for one who lives in a decaying metal cell," said Dail. He squeezed his bottom lip between his thumb and forefinger. "What is stored on it?"

Roj tapped a few more keys while looking down intently at the shelf surface. "Everything about the man's job, right down to uniform requirements. This guy keeps records of everything about the watchers." Roj's mouth enveloped every word, his lips literally forming the words. He was clearly in no hurry to say what he wanted to say.

"No financial records?" Dail asked repositioning his tight coat on his shoulders as he did.

Roj frowned. "Nope. Just lots of regulations and old news."

Dail's face lightened with some resistance, his lips grinned only faintly. "Just a good soldier I suppose."

"An obsessed one I say," Roj said, looking up to catch the sarcasm on Dail's face.

A group of five ships flew by, nearly scorching the building side just as Dail turned from Roj. This building, and Elon's room in particular, was right in the approach for tourist vessels coming into Mesathine. The vessels passed directly over the building, closer than air regulations allowed.

Luckily, the ships didn't launch in the building's direction, or Elon's room would have been dangerous. Even so, Dail could not understand why someone would live in this sector with such horrible positioning.

Not even sunlight filtered through the window. The whole building faced the opposite direction, in an odd placement, as if the builder were striving to keep the light out. The dimness was encroaching on Dail's reasoning. He could feel it. This atmosphere was changing his thought patterns, making him feel sluggish and depressed. He couldn't stay here much longer, peering in on the life of such a pathetic individual whose only source of well-being was a job he was under-qualified for.

The attack would be the last mistake for Kil Elon. Elon's clean service record made it appear to others that he had been a model soldier, but Dail knew the truth. Elon had no experience in the field, his weapon capabilities were nonexistent, and he had failed to complete many of the most elementary training courses. Kil Elon may have had his heart set on being a watcher, but he was far from capable.

Roj stepped up beside Dail. "Too much good stuff in this room for such a dump. What a waste."

Dail eyed another flat keypad on the window edge. "This is a clvir unit," he said, touching his fingers on the window. The clvir was cool. A ring of vapor rapidly developed around his fingers.

"Why would Elon have a clvir unit in here?" Roj raised an eyebrow slowly, as most of his movements tended to be.

Dail examined the cold smoke. "He is a strange fundamentalist. He has the tools he thinks he needs to do his job. He doesn't need anything else." Dail pointed to the bed in the corner nearest him and abroad to the metal block seat back from the window.

Roj scratched his short, graying hair. Pellets of dust fluttered as he did, finding sanctuary in the movement. "So he won't have nice things unless they help him with his job."

"It appears so," Dail said, eyeing the straight-backed chair. It appeared slightly welcoming, but Dail would not let it fool him.

The keypad on the window edge began to beep. A single blue light blinked in rhythm.

Realizing this, Dail keyed a sequence universal to all clvir units.

The window flickered. The view of the outside merged with something else, something totally new, through multiple lines of new picture slowly weaving their way over the window. The flooding blocks of perfectly coordinated color then came progressively faster, taking what was left of the Mesathine city.

A face appeared. It was Mekos. "Glad I caught you sir," he said, remaining official, though showing signs of a sly gladness. "Elon has been captured by a Vise fortune hunter."

Dail nodded at Mekos, his lips curling into a grin. "Thank you, Mekos. Hold him until I arrive."

"Yes sir," Mekos said, reaching toward the screen, severing his end of the communication link. The screen faded to clear, once again showing the city's sprawl of buildings moving up the hill. Each appeared a similar variation of the others, a lackluster staple of this sector.

"Stay here and gather what information you can about his finances. I want everything confiscated." Dail tugged the lining of his coat.

Roj nodded and moved to the shelf again, as Dail made his way around the metal seat and to the door.

"Reos," Roj said just as Dail reached the doorway.

Dail turned back to face him.

Roj grinned. "Looks like she did her job after all."

* * *

An incandescent light penetrated the narrow hall. It was absolute resistance to the dark, a vacuum to the unknown.

Seela Mirl's open-heeled shoes clattered on the rubbed stone floor. Her sight was trained on the light, her spirit ached for comfort, but there would be none, not here. She knew quite well who awaited her in the solitary room. It was the only lighted area in this complex at this time of night, and that was no coincidence.

Her insides fluttered in a panic over what was ahead. It couldn't be as hard as she felt it would be. It was one small task. Ending it here was acceptable.

She stopped. Her hair swayed with the sudden movement. Her twitchy fingers brushed through the ear-length strands, moving it back in place less than gracefully. The rings on her left hand flashed a dull green, indicating her anxious feelings. The rings had a biochemical bond with Seela, interacting with her brain and bloodstream, identifying her emotions through her own chemical releases. The rings were always right. She didn't really know why part of her had the urge to wear jewelry that showed her inside impulses for the outside to see. It was the same part that urged her to cut her waist long hair up to her ears, something most women of Mesathine condemned, and use dye to streak it with red.

Seela did not want to go any further. She adjusted the lining of her sleeved blouse and dusted her protruding pant pockets – anything to waste time.

She glanced down at her attire once more to make sure all was in order. It was the bland maroon that she had been forced to wear all of her surgeon career, but it would have to do.

The hallway beyond the light was a murky gray, toned with the darkest accents at the farther ends. It was the same murky depth behind her, something that became very real when she stumbled upon the two security personnel. When they asked to see her identification, it startled her. They had crept from the corners without a sound.

Seela was still learning the procedure in the Defense Chambers. She wasn't accustomed to the rabid security. It was overwhelming, only adding to her nervousness. The guarded halls made her feel restricted, not protected.

This was most definitely Dail Reos' domain.

Seela gave a giant sigh. There was no other choice but to enter. She was close enough now that Reos had probably heard her anyway.

As she entered the room, the aroma overtook her. It was a heavy musk, soothing in its own unique way, but too thick and overpowering. It matched Reos perfectly.

He stood at the back of the room, behind a finely carved wood table that was stacked to the brim with parchments and intraceels – an odd arrangement. His stare was nonchalant, as if he had no cares at the moment, almost as if this were a social call.

"Come in," he said, his smooth shaven face belying the graciousness in his words.

Seela uneasily stepped in. She looked him in the eyes, trying to calculate his thought pattern. There was nothing immediately intimidating about him, but that could change if he did not have his way with things. Seela had already learned that.

He grazed a hand though his thinning white hair, smoothing it on the sides. His face looked fuller than usual. "You did very well, Mirl," he said, keeping eye contact.

Seela glanced down, noticing that she was unraveling the sleeve of her blouse. "I've done my part, now is that it? I want out."

Reos smiled. His slender jaw line met his checks with a curved flap of skin. "Your part is done, dear. You played along so well that you even fooled your friends at the hanger."

Seela tried to stop pulling at the treads. "They don't need to know otherwise. They wouldn't condone this betrayal."

"I should think not…but then again I heard every person in that hanger was ready to hand Elon over for the reward, despite your little act. Makes one think."

Seela had forgotten. Reos was right, but she would never let him have the gratification of knowing it. "If my job is secure then I'll be leaving," she said.

"Oh yes. Your job is secure. You'll also get a few extra mesi for your effort." Reos squinted just a bit.

Seela stood in the mellow light, examining Reos for a moment. The overhead light cast a dull orange over his body, giving him a certain mystique that didn't escape Seela. His lean physique and perfect posture gave him away. He had a calculating, cunning mind – the mind of a predator.

Seela finally stopped gazing and turned, ready to leave. She knew somehow that all was not settled. Something lurked in Reos. When she stepped toward the door, her intuition was confirmed.

"I doubted you would actually do the job," Reos said in his pretentious tone. "Roj and I took a security team to Elon's quarters, just in case you had failed to get him. I didn't want to use security to subdue him. You know, I'm glad I didn't have to."

Seela glanced back only slightly, seeing but a fraction of Reos from the corner of her eye. "Is that so?"

"It's bad for public opinion. No one approves when they hear of the Defense Committee breaking into private residences. It is good that they don't have to know."

That thought struck Seela, somehow making her realize something she had not fully understood. With Elon's punishment carried out, none of the other soldiers could ever benefit from the truth of the mukanta attack and the council cover-up. No one would ever know.

"Why are you telling me this?" Seela asked, masking her true thoughts.

Reos chuckled briefly. "Because you are part of it now."

That wasn't true. Seela couldn't be a part of the machine Reos had created. She started to walk again, unable to bear even the idea.

"You aren't even the slightest bit curious what Elon is really like?"

Seela stopped again. She was curious, and try as she might, she couldn't deny it.

"His walls are vacant, Mirl. He's a vagabond, a solitaire. He doesn't even have family on his intraceels. He's dangerous."

Seela kneaded her fingers. "How so?"

Reos' sigh gave her the impression that he would have explained even if she had not asked. "Don't be so naive. The unsociable types like him, they are the troublemakers. Something about being alone all of their lives drives them to do monstrous things. If we hadn't got him off the streets, he would have committed other crimes."

Seela trained her vision back on the door. She couldn't take any more of this. Without acknowledging Reos any further, she walked to the door. The rings on every finger glared red.

"Pleasure working with you," Reos' voice trailed as she shut the door behind her. He was chuckling to himself. She knew it. He thought he ruled all. He didn't, and somehow it had to be proven to him. Seela knew exactly how to do that, and the only person capable of it.

* * *

Voices hissed from the pulsating dome. Meandering complaints and rustlings made up much of the commotion. The holding chamber was created particularly for such discomfort and unease.

Seela had only been here three times. It was part of her minimal psychological training. She spoke with prisoners on each of those occasions in an attempt to learn the motivations for their crimes. It was only an introduction; she was by no means well versed in the field. She did, however, learn enough to understand how Elon must feel. A recluse retained in a crowd – he must have been feeling pure anguish.

Her eyes scanned the sprawl of bodies packed inside the radiant red dome. They were ravaged, bitter looking shells of a people that must have existed at some point. The energy charged dome walls herded them in a stiff circle, each sweaty body close to the other.

A scent of old skin found Seela's nose. The mutants were shedding. How utterly diseased they looked, standing there, yellowing skin peeling from their faces and arms in whole sheets. These were not of the mukanta's variety, these were much more intelligent – as intelligent as the city dwellers. These mutants were able to feel, and think complex thoughts, able to commit crimes and accept the punishment. A couple looked to be of the terrav breed, while the rest were most certainly murras from the East.

Seela held no ill-natured thoughts toward these mutants. She'd seen a few here and there on the city streets and they were always gentle and kind. Unfortunately, most of the population did not feel as Seela did, and the mutants found themselves living underground most often, feeding on city-dweller trash, or forming their own societies far from the central cities.

It wasn't fair to the mutants, since the city-dwellers had created them in the first place. Leonnessi – the most arcane of practices. Changing a person's breeding code; it was such an absurd and destructive experiment. The now ancient surgeons had no idea what they were creating, or how it would affect future generations. They had no idea the damage they would

cause, all in the name of profit, and of winning wars that were still being fought many decades later. The mutants were to be inexpensive, blindly loyal sacrifices for the governments of the seven central cities and their political territory wars.

Reminded her of Elon.

There were times when she hated being a surgeon in the twin cities. This cycle of manipulation had been going on for years, and it had to stop. Reos had to know that the truth still threatened his public image, or it would not. He had to know that his plans to cover up evidence of wrongdoing would not succeed. Elon had done the right thing in coming forward, although he was paying dearly for it. Elon could never again be who he once was, but there would be other watchers to come forward with surgical complications. Elon's bravery would spare them government wrath.

The Defense Committee would be forced to repair these soldiers to keep their positions and avoid the public backlash they would receive, because they allowed the city to remain vulnerable to attack, because the watchers were in poor health. The Committee – Reos – would finally realize that the truth was going to get to the public because Elon was out there to tell it, that it couldn't be hushed away.

All of the deceit to save on equipment costs. The Committee had been able to amass a treasure of mesi from the discontinuation of the expensive onem scopes the watchers had been so dependent on in the past. Seela knew the council had never anticipated a scenario such as this, although they certainly should have. Dail Reos was just too headstrong, but all of that would change soon enough.

There was still a lingering question in Seela's mind: was it worth it for her? She had nothing to lose from Elon's imprisonment. Were ethics worth turning her back on everything she had worked for in this city? She despised the political schemes. It was getting to the point of interfering with her ability to practice her craft. Still, she doubted she would ever know if this was the right choice, but sometimes one had to act, not think. Something deep just told her to follow this man down.

Seela eyed the lens. It was directing a discreet signal in the form of an almost invisible red beam, powering the dome from afar. Light morphing was a very new technology Mesathine, learned from the Vise and put into use only a short time ago. The prison guards on the raised platform hovered around the lens as if it were their prize, as if nothing else mattered – and it didn't. As long as the prisoners didn't kill each other, they were of no concern.

Seela had a plan, but she didn't know how well it would work. She only had one chance, so it had to. She took a deep breath and scanned the crowd once more for Elon.

She found him. He was unnoticeable, sitting on the floor near the dome wall. His head was buried in his hands. His fingers strained, pulled through his dangling hair and forced against his skull with all his weight. The hustle of people was getting to him. The commotion was almost too much even for Seela, who dealt with people on a regular basis. Elon must have been exhausted from the pressure.

Seela stood as close as possible without actually touching the dangerously sensitive dome. "Elon," she beckoned, to no avail. "Elon," she said a little louder. Still nothing. He sat there unmoved as other prisoners' feet stepped and prodded too close. "Elon," Seela said once more, loud enough that several mutants turned to face her with inquiring yellow eyes. It also got Elon's attention. He turned to her, finally wakening from his trance.

He brushed his hair back from his eyes, looking in the general direction of Seela, but not directly at her. "Who's there?" he said instinctively.

Seela could barely hear him. "It's Mirl," she said.

An awkward smile came to his weighted face, giving a bit of color to a bleak being. "I guess you've come to bid farewell."

"No, quite the opposite," she said, nudging her bangs behind her ears.

"You should have."

Seela huffed. "Well I didn't. I promised I would help you, and there is only one way to do that now."

Elon flinched, turning straight ahead as one of the murra grazed past him. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Getting you out of here."

"No. You can't risk your freedom for me. I'll take my punishment."

Seela moved her hair again, although it was already in place. "Look, there are other watchers out there who are probably having the same problems you are. You can't rot in here and allow them to keep dealing with this in secret. If you stay in here, then every single one that comes forward with surgical complications will be imprisoned just like you, and their name wiped away."

Elon nodded in agreement, looking down in realization of the fact.

"Reos isn't going to stop with you. The Committee has to know that they can't punish for their bad judgment. The mukanta attack was not your fault. If you had not had this procedure, you would have seen them in time to sound the warning."

"I know," Elon said.

"Show Reos. If you are out there, then the truth is out there. Reos will be forced to fix the failed procedures when the public learns about the cover-ups. Trust me, there is more out there for you."

"Where am I to go?" Elon's arms clasped his knees as his head hung low.

Seela eyed him for a moment. His beard was beginning to grow, the bristles matching his spotted hair. He still wore his watcher uniform, the white vest with two black stripes down the left side. Over the uniform he wore the crimson theern skin overcoat he had worn when he was taken from the hangar; it was unfastened, dangling on the sides of his shoulder like an unneeded extra weight. He had a soldier's build, though his pale skin differed from that of the soldiers who'd served in the field. "We can stay with my sister, Seela Erril, in Camis. I also know a surgeon there who can help you."

Elon glanced up again, then stood and walked closer to the dome. He was clearly navigating by the constant low-pitched hum, getting as close as he felt he could. "You can't do this. You just can't."

Seela resisted the urge to place her hand on the dome wall. "Just listen. I have a plan, but you're going to have to set it in motion. This is a choice I've already made…are you with me or not?"

Elon gritted his teeth. "I guess so."

"There is a murra behind you. Shove him as hard as you can." Seela kept her voice flat.

Elon just stood and stared past Seela for a moment. "You sure this is what you want? If I do this, there is no turning back for either of us."

Seela chewed her lip. Her heart pounded, beat after beat, faster than it ever had before. The yellow glints from her jewelry didn't help her feel any stronger, but she couldn't let her nervousness overcome her. She'd had field training just as Elon. She needed to use it and forget about all distractions. "I am," she said, letting a breath out.

The murra howled with abandon as he bowled into a terrav, the force of Elon's momentum sending both into the dome. The wall buzzed with the touch of foreign elements. The two bodies vibrated violently. Heat streaked down their face and neck in the form of red and white. After a moment the two unsuspecting prisoners were blasted from the dome wall, finally striking the floor offset from the center.

This did not go unnoticed by the other prisoners. Some of the obvious veterans began to mimic Elon's actions, sending more innocent victims into the barrier and onto the floor, unconscious, but still flinching.

This was the riot Seela was hoping for.

The volatile group didn't stop there. More went into the barrier, more to the floor. Pushing, biting, and stomping took over the cell. Elon tried with all his might to keep out of it, but it was a vain attempt. Seela knew it wouldn't be easy, but if he could make it a few precious moments he would be free.

The awaited reaction was already happening. The guards up on their safe platform had taken notice of the situation. Several scrambled to the ground floor to keep the prisoners from killing each other. That was one burden Seela did not want to bear.

The guards spread out in formation, four in a square around the round cell. Each of them wore the drab prison keeper's gray with patches of black where the threads had begun to wear. They were tall and confident, something the uniforms actually lent to their appearance.

Something else caught Seela's eye. Each of the guards carried a short barrel Dirindyr Calyr – the key to all of this.

Screams, whines, and all manner of lamentation continued to fill the room, while the guards worked to assess the situation. The dim glow of the overhead lights made the overwhelming number of bodies seem as one.

When the last guard moved into position, it was time for Seela to uphold her part of the plan. She approached the guard casually from behind, twitching at the thought of inflicting pain upon another. It was the only way. She gave him a swift push, causing him to lose footing and fall forward into the dome. She grabbed his firearm from its back holster as he fell.

The sound of his body being jolted from the barrier drew attention from the other guards, who begun moving in her direction. Seela pulled the weapon to her shoulder with haste, aiming just above the railing of the guard platform toward the dome control lens. She had to pull off a shot before the guards restrained her. She hadn't fired a Dirindyr in a long time, but she remembered enough…she hoped.

The guards were wasting no effort, now fully aware of who was truly to blame. Seela fired, knowing that if the blast did strike the lens, this crowd would rampage toward the exit, taking her down in the process.

The lens shattered, showering pieces of clvir onto the guards still on the platform. They began firing down toward her, but by the time any blast hit, it was too late.

In one horde, the crowd of prisoners began to stampede toward the doorway, overtaking the guards who pursued Seela and soaking up the shots from the platform guards. The crowd was unstoppable, and it was headed for her.

The horde overtook her. Some subconscious impulse made her dive for the ground, where it was seemingly safe. Bodies of every shape and size plodded over her, stepping on her legs and fingers. It was frightening for her, but probably worse for Elon.

Elon. She had almost forgotten. She looked around in a panic as the flow of prisoners cleared. There were at least twenty unconscious bodies; five of which were mutants, and four

that were definitely soldiers, the others unfortunate prisoners. There was a man on his knees not too far from Seela. It had to be Elon.

Seela rushed to her aching feet in a stumble, and then limped toward Elon. He was just getting to his feet himself, looking pain-ridden and confused. She grabbed his hand. "It's me, Elon," she said. "We've got to get out of here. More guards are headed down."

They limped past the awake but badly injured guards, as more fresh troops made their way to the floor. The doors had already been breached. It would be an easy exit.

The remaining guards fired on Elon and Seela, narrowly missing them with each shot. Seela led Elon to the door, waiting and watching behind her. When some of the guards reached the injured, she fired several shots at the lights. With a final crackle, darkness overwhelmed everything.

Seela wished the best for the injured, but she had no time to dwell. The exit was looming. The city lay before them through the open doorway. They were free for now.

* * *

The warmth of Mirl's hand gave Kil the comfort he needed to continue. This comfort, this mysterious energy, flowed between the two of them in a way Kil had never felt before. It was new and exciting. Someone actually cared.

He could feel something changing inside of him, and it was all because of her. He finally felt able to express every feeling that dwelt inside of him, every emotion that he had buried from the outside. There was one soul who could know his true person: Mirl, the root of his confidence now.

Her delicate fingers intertwined with his in a fusion that propelled him along the myriad of city streets that must have been filled with passersby. He heard voice after voice mumble about trivial things. The two had finally entered Elsrin, Kil's home sector, and the way to unchained, untraced freedom.

Kil never expected to come this far. He never thought he'd be leaving Mesathine over the mukanta attack, or the government secret he found himself in the middle of.

Camis. He'd never been there. He couldn't even imagine what the city was truly like. He had heard stories of the citizens of Camis taking part in huge assemblies to hear the city laws and decide their own fate. He could take part in it; he knew it was in him to try. He had also heard tales of the fabulously adorned monolithic high-rises that far overshadowed anything the twin cities had built. He'd heard of fortune, and the fastest, highest flying of ships, all acquirable if you knew the right people.

Mirl did. She knew surgeons who could fix his eyes. She had colleagues in Camis, people who could get him established, and keep him from the chaos that was collapsing his abilities now.

Two revolutions ago he was watching over this very city, and now he was trying to move discreetly through it, to escape it. It was unbelievable that the Defense Committee had less control over Mesathine than they had presumed. Anyone could move through this city. The Vise pilot, and now Kil, were evidence of the missing links.

The scent of the forest and new growth was in the air. The Reccira Forest stood not far beyond the city walls. Kil could almost envision the trees, with leaves that hung down from the top to the ground in one massive group. It was a mystifying, but deadly place, because the mukantas formed their villages deep within the woods in the webbing of limbs, leaves, and dense

blue-hued fog. As dangerous as it was, it would be the adventurers' only protection until they reached the Central Plains, the direct route to Camis. They would have to be diligent not to stray near the center of the forest, but instead scurry along the outskirts to keep out of sight of both Mesathine patrols and mukanta scouts.

"We're getting closer. Just a little further," Mirl said in her soft, reassuring tone.

The wind whistled through the street and across Kil's coarse face. It soothed him in a way he felt he should disregard to remain alert, but he was unable to -- it was too calm, too clairvoyant.

Mirl was right. Life out there would be better for him – for both of them. He could make the other watchers' lives easier. He could let the truth out, and send it back to Mesathine, so that the public protestors could force the committee to fix these failed experiments. Just maybe there was something more out there for him and Mirl, something they could forge together.

A sudden rush of voices came upon them. He was unable to decipher any of it until he came closer. Finally he realized. It was solicitors trying to pan off something no one wanted for a precious few mesi.

"Gemm, gemm for two mesi. Ma'am will you have one…or you sir?" A gasping voice said, one that had probably spent too much time in the aqueducts.

Kil brushed against a smelly one. He heard them mumble some arcane insult he had not heard in a long time.

"You want some rath meat, girl? Cooked it myself," another crude trader said.

"No, thank you," Mirl relied, continuing along.

"Come on, you must be hungry." Kil heard the man's voice trail off as the two continued navigating through the people.

"This is it," Mirl finally said, placing Kil's palm on the smooth stone of the gate column.

Kil smiled. "The last step," he said.

There was a silence. Kil was afraid Mirl was looking back. He hoped she wasn't having second thoughts.

"The first," she said after a breath, taking his hand in hers again.

There was a gentle essence about her. Kil knew deep within that this was where he was supposed to be, that the outside was his new destiny. No matter the profession he clung to before, or the devastation he endured in losing it, there was more for him in Camis with Mirl. It was a wondrous world he could now experience without regret. He had heard much about the many wonders of Alune, and now it was his to behold.

As he walked away from his old home, he once again saw all of the brilliant colors of the vastness ahead.

The End

Frank Ray Ard, Jr. lives on the Alabama coast. He is currently working on his bachelor's degree in the Computer Science field, and in his free time he enjoys writing science fiction and fantasy. Writing allows him to explore new worlds and examine the depth of human emotion. The Opaque Watch is his first published work.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 19

Tomhas tried to distract himself with thoughts of the welcome he would receive when he finally emerged from the woods. His wife would be angry about his lateness, but her relief at having him home would swallow that up. She would make him a hot meal, and then he could sleep in a warm bed. He would return to the cabin with his sons the next morning, and gather up the best of the wood he had split on the previous day. He had to travel deep into the Friwold for quality timber that he could sell to the finest craftsmen, but it was worth the hefty fees he received.

He found his hand once more resting upon the shaft of his hatchet, and this time he did not draw it away. The night seemed darker than ever. The sensations of being hunted were very strong now. Without ordering it consciously, he began to jog. Then, also against his will, he began to run, his breath sliding in and out with ragged squeaks. They were coming! He began to sweat, despite the coldness of the air. He did not look over his shoulder, for fear of what he might see. It was all he could do not to scream. The dark trunks of winter trees rushed past him, their leafless claws soaring overhead.

Tomhas' foot struck something, and he pitched forward with a yelp into a patch of unspoiled snow. His lungs emptied as his chest was squeezed against the ground. It was a couple of seconds before he rolled to a kneeling position, hatchet in hand, looking back at the darkness from which he had emerged. He was faced only by stillness and silence. His fear gradually ebbed away, swept off by the chill wind, which now became a reassuring presence.

Terror leapt up in his heart once more when, behind him, a voice spoke like cold water trickling down dark rocks. "You are safe, man, for now," was all it said. Tomhas scrambled around, hatchet raised to strike.

It was a moment before he realized what the speaker was. He gasped in shock. Before him stood something he had only seen before in an illuminated story book: an elf. The immortal's willowy frame, six feet tall at least, was sheathed in perfectly interlocked black armor plates, the sheen of which was more akin to wood than to metal. The hands were long and delicate, with a full set of spindly fingers each, bare except for a plate covering the backs of the hands. Both were wrapped around the shaft of a seven foot spear whose point extended two feet downwards along the shaft to form a slender axe blade. A pair of identical short swords were strapped at his sides, encased in ornate sheathes. The neck was longer than any human's, wrapped in an extremely fine mesh of tiny rings of the same substance as the armor. The face was tall and pale, with high, prominent cheekbones and a sharply pointed chin, penetrated by eyes that glimmered like frozen stars. There was absolutely no expression on the elf's face -- its every feature was still. The only part anywhere on its body that moved in the slightest was its mane of black, shoulder-length hair, which swayed gently in the cold breeze.

For a long time, Tomhas and the elf gazed at each other. Tomhas' frightened brown eyes locked with its utterly cold blue ones. Then it spoke, only its mouth moving, while everything else remained still. "We should be on our way. You have not yet escaped from the danger that tracks you."

"So something is following me?"

The elf nodded, a gesture more fluid than anything Tomhas could hope to do. "What is your name?" he said.

"Tomhas Chandlerson. I cut wood in the deep forest, then bring it into the village to sell. I live there, in the town."

Something about the elf made Tomhas want to confide in him, even though he had only met him a few moments ago, a creature out of legend. Again, the elf nodded. "I am

Juun'Slil'ona. You may call me Slil, if it fits your tongue better."

Then Slil put his back to Tomhas, who scrambled to his feet, brushing snow from his well-worn clothing. "You will never leave these woods now, Tomhas Chandlerson, without my assistance," said the elf, not bothering to turn around.

Tomhas glanced around at the dark trees surrounding him, and the bone-white snow which covered the ground. Then, clutching his hatchet firmly, he followed Slil.

* * *

Slil walked with such an effortless grace that Tomhas felt like a clumsy boar, grunting and snuffling along his track. Despite his armor, the elf's slender feet made hardly any impression in the soft snow. He seemed completely invulnerable to the cold air which chilled Tomhas so completely.

"Excuse me...Slil...but where are you taking me? This isn't the way to my town," he said at last.

Without turning around, the elf said, "You will not reach your home by pointing yourself in one direction and marching off. It is no longer so simple. Know this, Tomhas Chandlerson: your situation is one of the greatest danger. There are forces beyond the knowledge of mortals acting here."

"Like an elf."

Slil let out the smallest of chuckles. Like his every other action and sound, it was lovely and fluid. "Like an elf."

Tomhas did not speak again for a while. It could hardly have been more than ten minutes, but in his present situation, it seemed like a full hour. Then he said, "Slil, I need to know what you're doing with me. Why? Who are you?"

"It is as I told you. I am Juun'Slil'ona, one of the elven kind. What am I doing? I am trying to extricate you from the peril into which you have come. Why? My reasons are my own. Only trust. I can do nothing without that."

Tomhas grunted, and immediately regretted it. He was enough like a wild pig already.

He shuddered as a blast of frigid wind filled his cloak. The woods were getting thicker and darker with every step, not lighter. Could this elf be the force which had been pursuing him, clothed in its current form to deceive him and draw him away? He knew, somehow, that this was not so -- the elf exuded something that was not of the senses, an intangible power, but it was not the evil that he had felt before. There was no trickery in the elf's manner or way of speaking, and he had shown no sign of turning his bladed spear on Tomhas.

Suddenly, Slil stopped and held up one slender hand, ordering Tomhas to do the same. Tomhas started to speak, but was cut short. "Be silent," the elf hissed, dropping his bladed spear into both hands. The runes on his dagger sheaths flared up with violet light. The elf's face turned slowly first in one direction, then in the other, searching with a distant look in his eyes. Tomhas held his breath.

After an eternal pause, Slil's head snapped around to point at the gap between two tall, straight trees. His pale eyes narrowed, and he spoke a few words. Tomhas could not make them out precisely -- he could not have written them down -- but the power of them seemed to fill the woods. A loud snap rang out, there was a flash of brilliant light, and the elf's face softened. "The trap was subtly placed, but it is safe to go on now. Come, and stay close behind. Our enemies

will soon grow bolder."

Tomhas was very glad that they -- whoever they were -- were enemies to the elf as well as to him.

* * *

It was at least another hour more before Tomhas knew for certain that the night in which he and Slil wandered was not natural. It had been many hours since he had set out from his cabin, and still there was not the slightest hint of any dawn. This revelation added another layer to his fear. The stars now seemed like baleful eyes spying on him, rather than the cheerful lamps of previous nights. He found himself walking even closer to Slil's side, struggling to keep up with the elf's swift pace. His legs were tired and sore, despite their years of training at walking long distances. Even the wind seemed colder, more penetrating.

The aura of evil, of being hunted, remained despite Slil's strong presence. Sometimes Tomhas could hardly notice it at all, while at other times it seemed as though it was a mere pace or two behind. Tomhas kept peering back over his shoulder at the darkness. His fingers kept creeping back under his cloak to wrap themselves around his hatchet's firm haft. Through all this, Slil remained totally impassive. He made no attempt at conversation, and his face remained as frozen as the snow under their feet.

Then a loud thump rang out, nearly deafening after such a long time filled only by footsteps and wind. Slil was facing towards it long before Tomhas could maneuver himself around, spear held in both hands, ready for use. The runes on his dagger scabbards glowed bright violet.

Silence reigned for a long while, and Tomhas's surprise gradually ebbed away. But Slil remained tense, like a lynx readying itself for a strike. Then Tomhas saw motion in the darkness. He pulled out his hatchet with trembling hands as something stirred among the trees. "Put it away, Tomhas," hissed Slil, his mouth barely moving. "Stay still, and do not speak or make any noise."

The moonlight shifted once again, and something tall and dark emerged from the skeletal trees. As it came fully into the moonlight, the ground quivering beneath it, Tomhas nearly collapsed from fear. It was as if a great tor of stone, which had stood for a hundred thousand years undisturbed, had come alive, in the form of man and mountain combined. Gray flesh knotted itself around a bulky, hunchbacked frame. Arms like tree trunks hung almost to the ground, with fingers that were like a blacksmith's tongs. Its legs were pillars, its chest a massive boulder of cold stone. A head emerged suddenly from the top part of its barrel chest, with no neck whatsoever. The eyes were small and hard, but still they glowed with some interior animation, like light reflected through a clouded crystal. The beast stood easily fifteen feet tall, perhaps more. Tomhas could hardly tell. A crack split open in the center of its face, a gateway into a yawning cavern, and a long, low rumble forced its way out, rattling the trees and shaking snow from their branches. The great thing's eyes flared up, sparks like those that flew when flint met with steel.

Slil advanced a step, sinking the butt of his spear into the snow. The glowing runes on his dagger sheathes dimmed a little. The elf's severe mouth opened, and another bone-quivering rumble rolled through the woods. It was a moment before Tomhas realized that it had come from Slil, and not the great beast standing before them. The stone creature rumbled again in

response, this time so low that Tomhas could barely hear it, although he still felt its effect on his surroundings. Slil responded in turn, with a similar sound that dropped entirely out of Tomhas' hearing range.

That strange conversation went on for minute after minute. Slil and the great stone monster exchanged rumbles and growls, hoots and bellows. The beast paused at intervals to stamp its feet and pound its gnarled fists against the ground. Slil stood quietly during these outbursts, until the time came for him to respond to the beast's next sally. At last, the two ended their conversation with a long roar which they voiced in unison. Then Tomhas watched in awe as the monster, its hands on the ground, folded its legs beneath its gargantuan torso and sat down. Its weight pushed a shallow dip into the ground beneath it. Then it closed its eyes, its limbs fell slack, and it lay still and silent. Slil simply turned his head and continued walking, with Tomhas jogging alongside.

"What was that thing?" he wheezed.

"A Golam. There are very few of them left in these times, and they almost never show themselves to elf or mortal for any reason. They are good by nature, and that one sensed the evil which stalks the forest tonight, which slows the coming of dawn. I told him that I was not its source, and he told me to watch and keep myself, and that he would destroy the evil if it came near to him."

"That's all that you said? But you must have talking for a half-hour, at least."

"The language used by the Golams is...complex would perhaps be the best word. A mountain viewed from afar seems a simple thing, but when one is walking along its trails, its intricacy is astounding. The details of his speech would be of no interest to a mortal."

That was all he got out of the elf about the matter, despite further questioning.

* * *

It was only a little later that Tomhas' legs dropped out from under him, too exhausted to go on, and he toppled onto the ground. Slil extended a delicate hand to help him rise. The elf's expression was contrite, in a far-off, alien way. "I apologize. I am not used to walking with mortals, and I should have known that your limbs would tire."

From some hidden pocket of his form-fitting armor he drew a small flask of smooth crystal. Golden liquid swished around inside as he held it out to Tomhas. "Drink, but only one swallow."

Tomhas drank, only a drop at first. When he felt its overpowering sweetness on his tongue, however, and exulted as its summery warmth slid down his throat, he knocked the flask back and gulped down a mouthful. It rushed down his throat, a waterfall of pure light, and spread out through his whole body, warming and refreshing. The aches in his legs faded as a flowing, pulsating life filled his blood and flesh. His hunger was swallowed up in the warmth. He would have drained the flask, sucking out every drop, if Slil had not snatched it away. "More than that would not be good for a mortal," he said, the flask vanishing into his armor.

Tomhas regretted the loss of the bottle, but his energy was now restored, his flesh warmed, and his hunger driven away. He walked on with a new bounce in his step, while Slil did not change his pace in the slightest.

* * *

Tomhas cried aloud with fear when, reaching the bottom of snowy dish in the ground, he

turned his eyes upward. Slil was already crouching into a battle stance as Tomhas fumbled for his hatchet.

A pack of hounds looked down at them from the bowl's rim, gazing between the trunks of the few rows of trees which separated them from Tomhas and his immortal companion. But they were like no hounds that Tomhas had ever seen. Silver fur covered their lean flesh, gleaming faintly in the moonlight. Their jaws were split open to reveal more teeth than any natural beast had. Each one had a pair of pointed antlers thrusting up from its sloping skull. Their limbs were thick and powerful, their backs tall and arched -- they were greater in size than any mortal dog, and their eyes flamed with evil light.

A chorus of feral howls resounded throughout the bowl, one of them Slil's. Then the hounds rushed down, cloaking themselves with plumes of powdery snow, barking and yelping. Tomhas saw that they had a full three rows of inch-long fangs. He unconsciously stepped behind Slil, clutching his hatchet. It was a mere toy against such monsters, but it would be comforting to die with a weapon in his hands. He steeled himself for the fate that takes all men, watching the nightmare pack crash towards him -- but he was still quivering with terror. Some leveled their horns, others tore their jaws open unnaturally wide, obscuring their savage eyes behind masks of teeth and ragged gums.

Slil leapt to meet them, and they crashed together like two mighty waves on the Eastern Sea. A war cry that was painful to hear burst from the elf's throat, like no mortal sound Tomhas had ever heard. His spear flashed with an interior animation, whistling as it swept through the air, moving so fast that Tomhas could hardly follow it with his eyes. Every time Slil struck, he shouted out a word in a language that was both elegant and savage. Two of the demon hounds were carved open almost instantly after the two forces met. They kept going even with long gashes bisecting their sides, at a slower pace. Slil killed one by lopping off its antlered head, but the other came pounding towards Tomhas while the elf was engaged with the rest of the pack. He cried out and swung his hatchet down at the monster's sloping forehead. He was almost shocked when bone crunched and black liquid burbled forth. The beast plunged forward still, shoving into his mid-section. They went down in the snow together. The hound's antlers raking his shoulders as it struggled to bring its fangs up to Tomhas' front. He hacked at it, flailing madly, carving apart its skull. At last, the thing stopped moving, its head a bloody ruin.

Tomhas threw the carcass off of him, gagging with revulsion, and scrambled to his feet. His breath wheezed in and out in ragged snatches, his belly ached and his shoulders burned, but he was not wounded seriously. The black blood upon his hatchet vanished and rose into the air as a foul-smelling puff of dark steam, and a great mass of the stuff flowed from the body.

Slil's bladed spear shimmered downwards one last time, carving the final demon hound's head into two halves. The carcasses of the pack surrounding him also dissolved and rose into the night as clouds of oily steam. Tomhas took a step towards the elf, but Slil's attention was elsewhere. "Come out. You will never take the mortal without defeating me. Let this hunting and chasing end, so that we face each other openly."

Tomhas followed the line of Slil's gaze, and for a moment he saw nothing but black branches and tree trunks and white snow. Then a shadow dropped onto the snow and stepped into the full moonlight. An elf, but one of a very different sort from Slil. His face was rounder and smoother, his hair lighter in color. He too wore armor, but where Slil's armor had the sheen of somewhat wooden metal his was dull, like slightly metallic wood, deep green in color. He wore no baggage, and his only weapons were two sheathed daggers on each of his hips. These were

much like Slil's, but straighter and broader.

Tomhas knew immediately that this was the source of the evil stalking him. Fear and dread flowed from that slender, armor encased body, and Slil's scabbards were flaring up brighter than Tomhas had seen them before. He considered fleeing, but stood his ground. Slil was with him, and he now firmly believed that his elf friend would protect him from all danger.

The green-armored elf spoke several words in a lilting, fluid tongue. Slil's eyes hardened. "Is it not customary, Tree Walker, to answer in the language with which you were addressed? I spoke with the tongue of mortals."

The other elf glowered for a moment. "Greetings to you, Juun'Slil'ona, Shadow Walker," he hissed, not paying so much as a glance to Tomhas, who now felt as though he was a mere insect, insignificant before beings of such power.

Slil nodded. "And to you, Raph'Kepun'dwendir, Tree Walker."

"You might explain to me, Shadow Walker, why you have thwarted my every effort this night. I have given you many warnings, but you heeded none of them. And now you have slain my hounds. It will take me many years to breed their like again. You force me also to dirty my tongue with the words of mortals. I have not attacked you yet -- the hounds would have left you, if you had stepped aside -- but my hand will be forced if you do not surrender him to me now."

Now the elf Kepun did turn his eyes towards Tomhas, and he saw immeasurable hatred pooled in them, a terrible emotion which was deep beyond any mortal feeling. Tomhas would have fled but for the commanding tone of Slil's voice. "You have no power over this one, and it is you who have transgressed. You have departed from the place reserved for you. You have brought staghounds before the eyes of men, and if it were not for my interference, you would already have slain him and broken the Pact again, for you have spilled the blood of men before. It is you who must either depart or perish. Your killing will cease."

Savage light flared up in Kepun's eyes. "So you choose the way of mortals, Shadow Walker?"

Slil nodded his head. "Do you not remember the Pact forged by He Who Is? To hunt and murder the mortals, with all the aids of sorcery, is to defy His will."

Then Kepun broke his pretense of nobility, and his mouth opened to let out a roar that would have better fit a bear. In one movement his slender hands stabbed downwards, wrapped around the coiled hilts of his daggers, and drew them out. The scabbards had begun to glow, lighting up serpentine runes, and the same patterns were etched into and ignited upon the smooth dagger blades. Slil cast his spear to the ground and drew his own short swords, glowing all over with violet patterns.

Then the immortals, howling in alien tongues, rushed at each other through the snow. The runes on their blades, violet and green, blazed violently until the entire weapon was sheathed in light. Then they met.

Their dagger blades swung too fast for Tomhas' mortal eyes to follow, leaving trails of fuzzy brilliance in his vision. When they came together, showers of sparks burst forth, displaying all the colors of sunlight seen through a prism. It was beautiful in a way: the swirling, leaping dance of the fighters, the colors of their blades and the clashes between them, the savage music that streamed from their mouths. Tomhas knew, however, that it was the most furious battle that he could ever hope to behold. There was far more contested here than merely the death of one or the other -- the snowy dish crackled with immortal emotion, so strong that it washed freely over everything around.

Then the whirling dance of light and blades stopped suddenly. It had lulled Tomhas into a trance, and now he was jerked out of it suddenly. Had one of them died? He prayed that it was not Slil. But no, both elves were still moving. The green armored one, Kepun, was crouching upon Slil's chest, pushing his green daggers down towards the dark-armored elf's neck. Blocking his efforts were Slil's curved violet daggers, one stretched out to each side. The immortals were pressing their faces together, snarling ferociously. The strain in their expressions was obvious and, to Tomhas' horror, Kepun's daggers were slowly pressing through Slil's defenses.

Tomhas stood. Neither of the elves was paying any attention to him. His hatchet was still clasped in his hand; he had kept his grip on it through the elves' strange conversation and battle. Now, as he looked at Slil's intense exertion and Kepun's hateful glee as his blades slid closer, he knew his course of action.

Gripping his weapon so hard that it hurt his hands, Tomhas strode forward. Even as he neared and stood just a few feet away, neither of them paid him the slightest attention. Clenching his teeth to keep his jaw from trembling, Tomhas raised his hatchet high overhead. For a moment, he hesitated. Did he have any right or power to interfere in these matters? It seemed almost tantamount to sacrilege, for a mortal to even consider such a deed. Then the moment passed. Tomhas fixed his attention on the back of Kepun's skull and swung.

The elf's skull was like a stone under his blade, and a wave of pain rattled up through his bones at the contact. A small rivulet of blood trickled out, but red blood, little different than that of men. Tomhas' blow did the elf little harm, but it was enough. Kepun turned and fixed a hateful gaze upon Tomhas, a look that blasted his eyes with its intensity. It was only for a moment, but that was long enough for Slil to disengage one of his daggers and bring it around in the sweeping slash at Kepun's throat. Then the green armored elf's blood flowed freely, splattering all over Slil's face and chest. He let out a last strangled howl while Slil shoved him away and shimmered to his feet. Tomhas watched in terror, his hatchet dripping with immortal blood, as Kepun writhed and thrashed in the snow. Screaming hellishly despite his slit throat, he slowly dissolved into roiling clouds of oily smoke like the stuff from the hounds, but more, thicker, and blacker. Within half a minute he was gone, and his smoke was drifting away to the wind. Even after he had vanished, the howling remained for a time, his last testament to the living world.

Slil plunged his daggers back into their sheathes, and took up his spear once more. All his weapons were clean, and the blood had vanished from his armor and face.

He sighed, looking at the spot where Kepun had died. "His heart was dark indeed, and he was not the first Tree Walker to fall into evil. Many are the sorrows of the elves."

After a time of contemplation, he returned his attention to Tomhas. "We have almost reached your home, and we will be able to proceed unhindered now."

* * *

Tomhas felt tears staining his cheeks as he caught sight of his village -- his sweet little village -- with the rising sun framed behind it. The windows of the houses were dark. None of them had yet woken. Tomhas would be able to return home in time to greet his wife and sons as they rose -- if they had not been kept up all night from worry for him.

He turned to the elf standing beside him, smiling for the first time that night. "Thank you, Slil. I don't think I could ever understand fully what you did, but thank you."

He was surprised to see his smile mirrored on the elf's face. "I must also thank you. The Tree Walker would have taken my life, if not for your interference. You are a great one among mortals, Tomhas Chandlerson."

"Thank you. I think that I am the first man in living memory to receive such praise. And...do you think that I will ever meet you again?"

"No. It is not the way of things that my people should have dealings with yours. I am best remembered only by your legend books. But even the immortals cannot see what may come. It may be that our roads will cross once more. Do not worry. It will be safe for you to walk in the woods, now. Farewell."

Slil took a step backwards, waving him on. Tomhas set off down the slope, wondering what he would tell his family. Everything, the unnaturally long night, his journey with Slil, the Golam, the demon hounds, the Tree Walker Kepun? No, it was best not to put such dark things into their minds. Some things were not for mortals to know. Perhaps, though, he would tell of his adventures as a story, a device to amuse his children. Then Slil would indeed be remembered only by legend -- and maybe that was best.

Tomhas knew that, for his part, he would return to work after a good, long rest. Once, he had feared the legends. Now he had encountered them, and passed through them all to behold another sunrise over his town. He had even smote an elf with his own hand, and not been struck down for it. Slil had given his word that he need fear nothing in the woods, and the elf had proved himself worthy of trust.

He glanced up at the top of the rise. Slil had vanished, and no trace of him remained. But still, as Tomhas saw and greeted the first early-rising baker, he knew that his adventures of that night would remain locked in the vaults of his memory forever. And he would always recall that, in some small way, he had been friend to an elf.

The End

Sean T. M. Stiennon is a home-schooling high school sophomore, and he has been writing novels and stories for about 2½ years. He writes fantasy/sci-fi because those are his favorite genres to read, and he prefers to create his own settings and situations, and explore plots and ideas freely, rather than rely on historical/contemporary ones. This is his first publication. His personal website can be found at www.freewebs.com/lunarfortress.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.

continued from page 27

fight.

Not many of his people remained alive and combat-worthy after a century of wars against the five demonic minions: against the Children of the Full Moon, wolf-shaped warriors; against the immortal Sons of Blood who lived on the blood spilled at the fields of combat; against the beloved of the Sky and of the Earth, the Dragons of the Hidden Islands; against the Shadows of Souls, the inhabitants of the Antiworld that had come from their misty lands to haunt the Five Tribes; and against the dead that walked again amongst the living, bringing decay, destruction, and despair with their every step.

Meneas, the Leader of Men, turned his gaze away from the table and returned to his throne. He sat, weary in his soul, hopeless, lost in his uneasy thoughts, drowning in emptiness. He removed his crown from his forehead, leaving it to rest on his knees. Beside him was the Sword of the Union with which he had been proclaimed, a long time ago, Leader of the Five Tribes, fourth in the row of the Leaders of the Union.

Fourth. Maybe the last.

Tears ran down his cheeks only to be lost in his dense, old, grizzled beard. His long hair, same color as his beard, aged too but still grand and majestic, spread on his strong shoulders.

The Fourth Leader, the Last Leader, burst into tears. He mourned for the world the humans were about to lose. He mourned for hope -- hope that perhaps had already been lost.

He recalled the recent events. The fate of Enstan, champion of the White Star Tribe was the first to reach his troubled mind.

1. Enstan's fate.

"My Lord, My Leader, Leader of us all, hear me:

"I, Rednan of the White Star, who now feel the ground give way under my feet, will tell you the story of Enstan and how he perished, fighting the King of Werewolves, Gargath, in the Palace of Kadnon, high on the mountaintops of the Ancient Sierra.

"Enstan of the White Star Tribe was not the best among our warriors, Lord, but he was truly worthy. Worthy and wise for his age, o Leader, so he did not deserve to meet with death at the far-away land, as he did.

"He had an ugly death, screaming without words with a severed tongue, skinned alive into a pool of blood, sitting on the throne of the Werewolf-King, where his torturers left him to die slowly.

"The battle with Gargath was truly a show of his wisdom, his bravery, his courage, and his skills. With the Werewolf-King beheaded by the mighty Blade of the Full Moon that Enstan wielded on the name of Humanity, all he had to do was take the beast's motionless heart and return it to the Shrine of the Speechless Prophet.

"What made him believe, my Lord, that he could kill all werewolves, having first killed their King? What made him so arrogant, what made his wisdom evaporate, what towered his vanity over his reason, the reason that would have saved him from the fate which befell him? What made him remove the crown from the head of the dead king of the Wolf-People and place it onto his own? What put him into a screaming frenzy?

"None will ever know what thoughts whirled into his mind. You see, I didn't dare approach the hall of the throne in the palace. Hidden in the shadows I was waiting, ready to receive the

torn heart of Gargath and flee beyond the old lands of the Tribe of the White Star, beyond the eternally snow-capped continent of Kramria.

"I waited for him for many hours, but he did not come. Then, from my hiding place I heard the werewolf-guards discussing the events of the battle: how they had found their king dead and Enstan watching them with remorse from his seat at the throne, laughing hysterically, holding the Blade of the Full Moon, wearing the crown of Kramria, soaked in the blood of Gargath. Then I heard of his torture. And I sneaked into the Palace, having a wild hope that perhaps I could save him somehow. But I was too terrified of what I saw and heard.

"I could hear his screams, to the end. And I could see him, from a corner, being tormented. He suffered for many hours. Few humans could have been tortured as much, since the War against the five demonic tribes began. I almost went mad myself, o Leader. I nearly lost my sanity hearing his agonizing cries. I resisted, in the end; I don't know how or why. Perhaps a scrap of logic whispered to me, urging me to return back to you, my Lord; to bring the bad news to you."

After that remembrance, Meneas recollected the events that led to the treason of El-Hread, the champion of the Tribe of the Pale Moon.

2.El-Hread's treason.

"I wish, O Leader, for your life to be long, you who are helped by the great Demiurge to rule over the Five Tribes, you who has been given the wisdom to lead my Tribe too, the Tribe of the Pale Moon, that once lived in the east, beyond this forsaken land, at the magical Harendtha of the searing yellow sands. Hear Al-Bebbe, who is still faithful to you!

"Alas, Lord! The warrior of the prophecy that we sent into the Golden City, general El-Hread, he who carried all our hopes of victory against the despised vampires, he who had the honor to carry the weapon of their demise -- The Spiral of Blood -- he who could send our enemies back to where they had come from on his own, is now an enemy! May his days on the world be not many, counted, full of sorrow. But now, with the Spiral in their hands, the Sons of Blood are truly invincible. From night to night, their armies march against us, their mindless servants protecting them during the daytime. And El-Hread, now one of them of his own free will, is anxious to lay his hands on your five-tipped crown, to make it his own, to rule over those of us unlucky enough to live after the upcoming battle.

"How did that happen, Sire? I really do not know. I, the general's bodyguard, the once-thief Al-Bebbe, who was cursed by fate to live, only to watch this treachery take place, waited for him in vain near the Columns of Calling. I waited in vain in the ruins of the ancient city outside the Golden City, the capital of Harendtha that once was our land, our country.

"He did not come. So I, anxious over his life, despite the nightfall that made me easy prey if I were noticed, sneaked into the City, climbing its high walls. I did that, Al-Bebbe, who defied those that drink blood to live, I, Al-Bebbe, whose great-grandfather's name used to spread terror into Sernendiya, the Golden Capital of Harendtha, once.

"Away from the now dry fountains, beyond the desolate squares, beside the prisons where the captives of the bloodsuckers live being milked like sheep for their blood, I penetrated their defenses, unseen.

"I reached the Hall of the Pale Moon whence we were, a long time ago, being ruled by our enlightened Elder and the Elders before him, before the city would fall to the bloodthirsty demons.

"There I watched him with my own eyes, which I wish had lost their sight just then as I witnessed that act of his. I watched him surrender the Spiral of Blood to Chneoth, the Archdemon, who in turn swore to make him immortal! "Grand amongst the immortal demons you shall be", Chneoth said, "should you help me undo the Oracle of the Speechless Prophet." For the demons also knew the prophecy well, it being the only thing able to foil their plans and send them back to the lands of black soil and red skies, whence they had come to our world.

"I do not know whether he had preplanned it, my Lord, or whether he was seduced by Chneoth's promises -because he could not have been tricked by magic, he who bore the Spiral of Blood.

"I only know that he betrayed us.

"And I know, my Leader... my Elder... that my soul has found peace, now that I have brought this news to you, though I should have brought Chneoth's teeth to place upon the Shrine instead. My soul is calm, for a while at least, until it sinks again into desperation, until I fight the final, desperate battle along with my comrades. My soul is as calm as it can be in these hard times hoping that, if you know of this treason, maybe you can still save your people, even now."

It was now the news of the demise of Lentnia, the Archmagister of the Tribe of the Red Sun, which began to ravage Meneas' weary soul.

3. Lentnia's demise.

"It is my sad duty, O Lord Meneas, Leader of the Union of the five tribes, to inform you of the bitter end of Lentnia, the Archmagister of the Order of the Technists; the champion that was sent to the haunted palaces of the Third Tribe, the tribe of the Red Sun, at the lands of Hefreyka that now are for ever lands of haunted death and unspeakable horror.

"Lentnia truly was the last hope for my tribe, the blossom of the Technists, the able user of the Arts that defy reality and logic. She alone could have thought of the plan involving the Mirror of the Antiworld. And she alone could have created it, using the Four Arts: The Mirror, the weapon that could send the leader of the Shadows, the formidable Kebalcka, back to the Antiworld where he belonged; the weapon that would steal his demonic essence. The artifact that would show him his idol -- the mortal existence he had had before becoming a Shadow -- the artifact that would drive him mad, allowing his immortal soul to escape from its devilish prison, traveling to the Fields of Souls Too Many, its final resting place.

"Unfortunately Meneas, nothing of all this happened. Lentnia traveled to Hefreyka in great danger. A rider of the wind she was at first, flying like a young hawk, then a dweller of the seas, swimming with a grace of a dolphin, finally becoming a swift traveler on earth, running fast like a panther.

"Tired, but safe because of the Four Arts, she entered Relkou the Tall City, and after entering the Citadel of the Winds she descended to its sunless pits at the Well of the Dead River, whence Kebalcka ruled over the Shadows.

"She found him. Kebalcka gave an unearthly howl and attacked her, more black than

the darkness of a starless night, so black that he would inspire terror by his existence alone. It was then that Lentnia took out the Mirror, presenting it to the demon while muttering the secret phrase. The Mirror shed a light amongst the darkness, a light bright as the sun itself and Kebalcka stood unmoving, unsure before it. He fell silent and that silence flooded the room, as the Mirror of the Antiworld glittered with a crimson glow like boiled blood in a cauldron.

"The Shadow was consequently lost, as if it had never existed and Lentnia, full of wild joy, looked into the mirror to witness the demon's last travel. But the Mirror was black, and Lentnia was shocked at what she saw next: The glass was depicting smoke whirling without order, without reason. Then that smoke was lost and the Technist saw her idol in the mirror. Only it was an idol deformed, a horrid incarnation of the charming Lentnia; a shadowy form that was wailing and muttering insults and curses to the Archmagister.

"It was at that moment, my Lord, that I lost the ability to see through her eyes, as her Second and as her aide. My Orania, my Sphere of Insight, hummed and then exploded so I neither saw nor heard through Lentnia again. But I know, Meneas, having used a powerful evocation which cost me more than merely my strength, that the Shadows now have a new leader. A Shadow more evil than the last one, armed with an object of terror, a mirror able of killing human souls, transforming them to Shadows -- and the opposite -- a double-sided blade in the hands of a careless human, but a weapon deadlier than death itself in the amorphous hand of a Shadow that knows how to use it, that has learned to be careful of its double blade, having already paid dearly for that lesson.

"And the hated Wraiths continue their struggle to dominate the world so that they can swallow its lifeforce, making it like their own world: The horrible Antiworld, where condemned Shadows wander crying in black deserts, swamps and wind-beaten mountains, hopelessly and forever searching for a way to end their torment.

"I am sorry that the Third Tribe failed. The Speechless Prophet's Oracle might prove false and our own existence may be the price.

"I regret, Meneas, Leader of the five tribes of Men, that the knowledge of the Technists was not put to good use, so to help the human effort."

The conspiracy that Nabrakar, Priest of the Tribe of the Sea Everlasting, did against the Union of Men came next to cause great pain tO Meneas.

4.Nabrakar's conspiracy.

"Leader of four tribes, you who were, long ago, our Leader also, learn this, which I know may cost me the head that stands on my shoulders: Our wise leader, Archpriest Nabrakar no longer swears his loyalty to you!

"He deems you unworthy, Meneas, to save the humans from the forthcoming calamities. He believes it is your fault, and the fault of the previous three Leaders of the Union that we are in this position now, because of your incompetence to confront the five demonic tribes we summoned, a hundred years ago, to aid us in our fight against each other.

"So hear, hear and despair by hearing it, the story of Nabrakar's deeds!

"Of Nabrakar, who rediscovered the Bible of the Final Rites, hidden in the Necropolis of Kembra.

"Of Nabrakar, who traveled, along with the Circle of the Three Mysts to our former lands and seas, the archipelagic Isles of Light that now have become the Dark Isles.

"The tale of our Archpriest, of our champion who confronted the resurrected Zaltonas and his army of the dead that were corrupting our holy grounds for many long years, spreading their rot everywhere! Of our great Leader, who chanted on the Karakarn, his magical ship, the rites of Power from the Unholy Bible. Of Nabrakar, who chanted all the rites save one, the one that completes the enchantment of the Last Farewell, sending the dead to rest again and forever!

"So he gained the rule of Zaltonas and now commands the Army of the Dead! It is with that Army that he will destroy the Four Demonic Tribes, taking over once and for all the world of Ilfion for the sake of the Fourth, the most glorious of the Tribes of Men, the Tribe of Sea Everlasting, the only tribe that managed to survive while all you unworthy men had perished.

"The Army of the Dead will gain strength through the dark evocations of the bible; it will be reinforced by the dead warriors of our tribe, who will float back to land from their watery graves to do battle for their tribe again. And as this happens, all you men will have already become Werewolf feed, or source of tasty blood for the Vampires, or terrified souls to be eternally hunted by the Shadows, or breakfast for the Beloved of the Sky and of the Earth.

"Then and only then shall we return back to the three continents to reclaim them with our army. And we will stand victorious over everyone and anyone that attempts to stop us, be it Man or Demon!

"We would have already done that a century ago, if only our cursed leader of the time, Fregreoth, had not lost his courage, becoming incapable of controlling those that he had called to Ilfion. Those that now, with a hundred years' delay, Nabrakar rightfully controls thanks to his wisdom, intelligence and knowledge.

"Only the most worthy will survive, Meneas! That is what my leader commanded me to tell you. And those worthy will, as always, be us. Vanish into the darkness, all of you, Leader-gravedigger of Men! I have already poisoned myself, so that you do not get the joy of slaying me..."

Finally Meneas remembered the tears of Ralneana of the Night Wind Tribe, the last champion, the only champion to return to him alive; it was another painful memory.

5.Ralneana's tears.

"You asked me, O Meneas, my Leader, my Lord, why I cry.

"I wail, although I succeeded in my mission, I, the champion of the Fifth Tribe of Men, the Tribe of the Night Wind. I sob, although I completed what the Dragonfighter Knights started but did not end, having been decimated at the battle of the Ancient Gorge.

"I, their last, the only woman knight, riding my warhawk, brave Gampsonychous, dared to fly high to the Floating Caverns, over the clouds of the worst of winters, holding the pendant with the tiny Sphere of the First Flame tightly in my palm: the one pendant with the small sphere, that the Speechless Prophet wrote of, revealing that it hid the secret of manipulation of the fifth demonic Tribe of Dragons.

"Hidden, trembling in fear but determined, I kept searching for the Shrine of Sky and Earth for many days, knowing that should I find it, I would also find in surety the King of Fiery

Death, the tribesmaster of dragons, Grakhath the Black, too.

"Having found him, I fought him. Wild was our battle, but the more he tried to burn me alive, or bewitch me, the more the Sphere protected me from his scorching breath and spells. Finally, at the most critical moment of our duel, my Birillian Sword found his belly at long last, tearing it, mortally wounding him.

""You won, she-human," he told me then. "You won, but did not win much..." he growled, lying upside down, spitting dragon's ichor and unburnt sulphur.

""With your magical Sphere and blood from my veins, you can drive my tribe away," he continued. "The same tribe your ancestors summoned long ago, so that they would be aided in the fight against each other, being only so foolish."

"The Shrine was shaken by the spasms of the black dragon and I lost my balance. But Grakhath had been beaten and did not intend to be sly. He only told me a few more words before drawing his last dragon breath, defeated by the Birillium of my sword and the Sphere.

""Even if you humans manage to drive us away however, I assure you by the Earth and the Sky that the quest of Men will fail. I offer you knowledge..."

"And then he sang the final, lost verse of the Oracle of the Speechless Prophet, Lord.

""...So will all these be true for good, or Men will fade away.

Alas, their fate in Ilfion is sealed, in surety they'll not stay!"

"Shortly afterwards he died, laughing.

"I mourn for us, Meneas, my lord. I shed my tears for our race, perhaps like the Speechless Prophet who probably lost all his courage, having been enlightened by the Vision of the Prophecy. I am now sure that he wept with every letter he scribed. And I am certain that there, near the end of the Prophecy he broke, and full of sorrow, did not complete the last verse.

"I cry, waiting for your wisdom to drive my actions, and those of my tribe, just as the last army of the Union does, waiting outside, in the Plateau of the Crimson Mists.

"I cry, but I obey our Leader."

What must I decide? What can I decide at this point? Meneas pondered. *What will come next?*

6.Meneas' decision.

No more than half a day had passed since all of the above had taken place. Their remembrance was strong, the tears hard to withhold, but finally Meneas wiped his swollen eyes and raised his head.

Many times during the whole time soldiers and generals, warriors and counselors, had tried to speak to him. But when they entered the great Hall and heard his sobbing they discreetly left, full of worries and despair over what they had seen: the man they had entrusted with all their hopes, crying like a small child.

Wanting to feel the glory of the Leaders of the past, he straightened himself on the throne. He leveled his chest; his face was stern, his gaze forbidding.

"I know that you can hear me!" he called out. "I know you listen in this Hall, trying to sneak into my own head. But come inside! I am now ready to talk to you!"

Slowly, the four big gates of the Hall opened, with their hinges whistling their own pitiful song, creaking with their lack of oil.

Four humans entered the Hall, advancing towards their seated Leader with slow, but sure steps. They stopped near the Throne, kneeling on their right knees with a quick move. They lowered their heads.

Meneas spread his right arm in front of him, like trying to cast a spell on them. Then he pulled it back, hesitating.

"I will not be kind with words," he began. "I will be harsh, cruel with them, enough to make your hearts bitter. But such are these harsh times, full of heartache and sorrow."

The commanders of the Four Tribes raised their heads and looked at him, unsure.

"We must leave," Meneas said calmly. "The time of our end in Ilfion has come."

The first of the four from Meneas' view, the leader of the First Tribe, Rastan the Fierce, attempted to speak. The Hall was ready to shake on his thunderous voice, but the Leader of the Union made a gesture, stopping him.

"I know what you are thinking of, Rastan," he said. "You do not believe my cowardice at this difficult time. You swear to retreat no more, but to die here, fighting without hope. For that is what I offered you today: hopelessness."

He observed them all. First he looked at Rastan, who was wearing his diamond-plated battle armor, having an impressive physical form with a chest like a solid wall of muscle and arms as thick as a redwood tree, a real commander of the First Tribe.

Then he watched the tall-and-slim Al Nasar of the Pale Moon, two daggers and a sword at his belt and a turban at his head. After him he saw Wernya of the Technists and of the Third Tribe, with her long, flowing, gold-sewn robes and sword, kneeling by her magic staff. And finally, Meneas beheld the blind but quick-minded Derkan of the Tribe of the Night Wind, who could see him with his trained ears, despite the loss of both his eyes.

"I offered to you what the champions of the Five Tribes of Men offered to me so graciously: hopelessness, despair, sorrow, confusion, among other things..."

"Lord," Al Nasar replied, "we may know the last verse of the Oracle of the Speechless Prophet, but each one of us writes his own life and final fate for himself, deciding for it. The Demiurge only sends us quick glances to the future, nothing more. For our lives would not be worth living otherwise, knowing their beginning, their middle and their end. So I ask of you that we make our last stand here, with what little forces with have, against their greater numbers..."

Wernya, who was watching Al Nasar while he spoke, said in turn: "I, Meneas, will obey you; such is the allegiance that the commanders of the Five Tribes have been giving to the Leader of the Union for a hundred years now, after the end of the civil war and the beginning of the war against the Five Demonic Tribes. But I obey with a heavy heart... for I will have to reopen the Portal of Artzian, whence our ancestors came to Ilfion two thousand and five hundred years ago. Only some thousands of the four Tribes have survived. They are enough; more than the fifty colonists that had then come from the Firstland, to explore and inhabit Ilfion. It seems that we have had our cycle at this world, a cycle which has now ended. We have lost another land. We made the same mistakes that forced those fifty remaining colonists, so many years ago, to abandon the world of Hakathana..."

Meneas nodded. "We did not manage to live peacefully in this world either... And who knows where the portal will lead us this time..."

"Leader Meneas, I cannot see you, neither can I see around me," Derkan said, being the last of the four commanders, "but I can clearly see through my mind's eye that those of us who

choose to stay on Ilfion will not have a good end. The hawkriders I sent beyond the mountains reported movements of the enemy near the foot of the mountain, and it is still daylight! When the night falls -- you know it well -- all demons move faster, with great efficiency..."

"They know what happened to the champions we sent against them. Obviously, all of them will now know that they are unstoppable," said Meneas, completing Derkan's sentence. "Rastan, Al Nasar, I beg you, for the sake of the few people of your tribes still alive, reconsider this! There is still hope for all of us. It just does not exist here. And that is none else's fault but our own. Those creatures did not come to Ilfion on their own. We humans of all the tribes summoned them ourselves, as our allies. And that happened because, for one more time, judging from what is written in the manuscripts of the colonizations at least, we were not able to live all together in peace. Despite knowing that we had made these mistakes before, we repeated them! Be mindful of the words of Poimesfalnos! It is an old stone, the one whereon he carved his advice, but here in this hall the first stone of the castle, the "Heritage of Poimesfalnos," still exists, and the advice of the one that brought our ancestors here is written on it. Look at it!"

Meneas rose from his throne, leaving his crown behind and pointed towards the table of stone. At its center, in the painted sun, a section seemed different: a stone older than the others, weathered, clearly not a part of the round creation of stone with the five carved swords and the yellow sun that shone with triangular rays.

Something was written on that stone, an inscription in the First Language:

"One Place, One Sky, For All."

"That was our mistake," Meneas said, without lowering his pointing hand and finger. "And since we made it, even though we had made it in the past too, even though we knew the consequences," he continued, "Our cycle, the cycle that every time begins with creation and peace, was doomed to end in entropy, chaos, war and destruction."

"With all due respect, Leader Meneas," Al Nasar spoke, "and despite knowing in my mind the truth of your words, I will stay and defend this last fortress. My decision reflects the will of my people of my tribe that remain in life. If we are to be lost, let us be lost here. Let us pay the price of our faults. Let us fall with dignity."

After he completed his speech, the commander of the Second Tribe stepped back two steps. There he stood, waiting for something to happen, whatever that would be.

"The White Star will remain by the Pale Moon," Rastan said, glancing at Meneas. "The banners of the two tribes will wave on the highest tower, on Ilfion's highest mountain, for one last time. Such is the will of the last fighters of the First Tribe that are still alive."

Leader Meneas look at the four commanders of the tribes for some moments, full of thoughts. Finally he spoke:

"But the Night Wind and the Red Sun, the other two tribes, will depart, still united under the banner of the five swords and the sun, Rastan; under my banner. They will seek refuge elsewhere, in new lands. And I, Meneas, swear to act as needed so that their new refuge becomes safe and peaceful. I do not take it as escaping punishment or avoiding my enemies, full of fear. Neither do Derkan or Wernya consider it such. The punishment for all that happened is our leave taking, our self-exile from Ilfion. My decision, I think, is wise and, though it seems cowardly, will save even at this last time some lives, so that future efforts may avoid repeating our mistakes."

Meneas sighed. "Of course, they may be made again. That was the way of things for us until now, anyway. But who knows? Maybe our descendants will be better than us. They must be better than us, so that no new champions will be needed, carrying our strengths and weaknesses,

fighting to wash away our sins, to correct the errors of the past."

Meneas turned his back on the four commanders and looked at the writings of the Speechless Prophet one more time. He approached the throne and took his crown. He put it on his head. "I hope," he said, "that no more oracles will ever be needed to seal our fates."

"I hope", he said, finishing, "that all of us will, in the end, find a land to house us all. Under a sky to cover us all."

The End

Nektarios Constantine Chrissos lives in Greece. He is, at the moment, an amateur writer who writes fantasy, horror and science fiction in Greek. His other publications have appeared in "Vasileio tou Fantastikou" ("Fantasy Kingdom") as well as the greek Fullmoon magazine rpg fanzine, in Greece. "Exile into Hope" is his first publication in English, a language he cosiders immensely atmospheric and fitting for works of fantasy fiction.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards.